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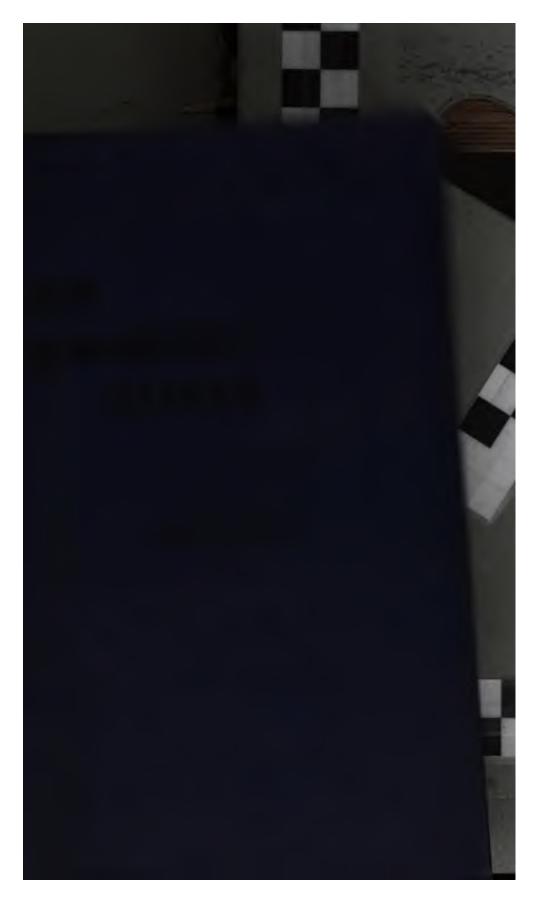
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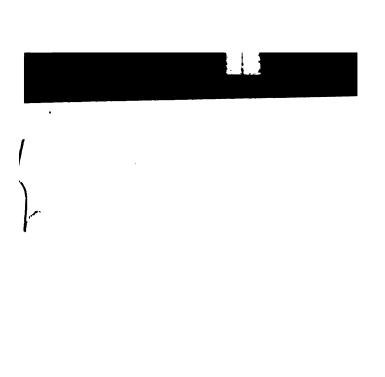
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OUR REMARKABLE FLEDGER

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OUR REMARKABLE FLEDGER

BY HARVEY BUXON

London

DIGBY, LONG & CO.

18 Bouverie Street, Fleet Street, E.C.

1900

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LAST WORDS . . .

Our Remarkable Fledger

INTRODUCTION

GETTING THE RANGE

FROM time immemorial it has been held of good repute to chronicle the doings of the great; to set forth their enterprises, extol their achievements and excuse their blunders; elaborating heroes, whom all might worship.

blunders; elaborating heroes, whom all might worship.

Now, hereby, do I take up a similar task—offering you the history of a certain superlative gentleman of the recent past, who was, undoubtingly, a radiant light and a hero in his own estimation, albeit his effulgence had but a narrow scope, while his exploits failed to win him the plaudits of a heedless world.

It has been said that some men are born great, that others achieve greatness, while others still have greatness thrust upon them, and although my hero belongeth not to the first, nor, in anywise, to the second place, in this category, yet should my Boswellian devotion, hereinafter apparent, prove successful in gaining for him the third, not only will my labours be amply requited, but I am assured that his magnified ghost will mount from the shades and call itself blessed—though my injunction will be needless, to worship it not.

And if, by these memoirs, furthermore, I should bring into secondary prominence divers kindred, if unharmonious folk, with whom, in his day, our hero was consociated, and others still, of a contrasting type, who, saving these good offices of mine, would never have known renown, I beg of you, gentle reader, to deny them not, one and all,

their various meeds of kind appreciation, duly remembering, as I daresay you will, how 'many a flower is born to blush unseen and waste its fragrance on the desert air.'

Without further preamble, therefore, and as a kind of title-page illustration, let me give you our hero's portrait, a presentment, understand, of the grand and commanding Principal of Waltonbury House Academy, to wit:—

Frederick Horatio Fledger, Ph.D.F.S.A.M.C.P., and Professor of Caligraphy from Burton College, Mancaster, as duly emblazoned and set forth on a huge and brilliant board, extending from end to end, on top of the stately old mansion which he occupied, and whose quaint repose and quiet dignity he had outraged and effaced by this—his rampant heraldry—his entablature of arms.

CHAPTER I

THE SCHOOLMASTER

FREDERICK HORATIO FLEDGER, at the period I bring him to your acquaintance, was a man of fifty years or more, short of stature and thick set—nathless, with a weakness in his legs and knees. This was so apparent when he walked about, that the bigger boys of his academy, with a proper regard, of course, to time and place, used to call him 'a man, all but his legs.'

His peculiar build was emphasised by the long-tailed, double-breasted, black frock-coat which he habitually wore, and the spindle-shanked trousers which were visible only for a hand-span beneath it. A black satin stock, out of which arose an ample shirt-collar in the shape of a plough-share; creased and volumnious shirt wristbands to match, and an imposing spread of shirt front, completed the sum of his attire, while in the right-hand top buttonhole of his most respectable coat, he hooked the minatory cane which, hanging therefrom almost to the ground, kept him constant company during school hours.

Mr Fledger's face was flat and sallow, and wore, like a mask, an unvarying touch-me-not expression, which must have cost him some effort to adopt, and still more to maintain, for the cast of his physiognomy ran counter to it; but then he was sensible, I doubt not, that the ridiculous is but a step removed from the sublime, and therefore a step that he durst not take.

His eyes were small, restless, and of the lightest grey; he had little or no eyebrows; his long, thin nose was hooky and his chin retreating; his upper lip was puckered, like the mouth of a bag, and his under lip pendulous and protruding. His forehead was tall and bulging like a bare knee, and his snaky black hair, which failed at the temples, held its own in upright self-assertion at the summit of his head, depending thence in a generous, back-flowing wave to his shirt-collar behind. He wore no moustache, but his face was framed in with a nicely-clipped, mutton-chop roll of black whiskers. Finally, as if to set a seal upon his peculiar personality, a large and prominent mole mounted guard, in crimson ugliness, over his right eyebrow. His pale, yellow hands were clammy and cold, and never particularly clean; in fact, with all his display of broadcloth, satin-stock, and shirt-linen, a general wash and brush-up would have given a better finish to his distinguished

However, in the eyes of his younger pupils, he was, for a long time, the very embodiment of scholarly perfection; and these things I tell you about him were, to their minds, only the necessary adjuncts to a great whole, contributing to the magnitude of a 'proper' schoolmaster.

After a while they knew better.

Mr Fledger's menticultural activities were of a prosilient and desultory nature. There was always a clambering and sprawling over the ground to arrive at the higher places of knowledge, with no attempt to plant the foot firmly anywhere in particular, or to set up a landmark in the vivid perspective as he vaulted along. The dead level routine of the 'three Rs was as irksome to his temperament as it was altogether apart from his tastes, yet I will do him the justice to explain that he was aware of this weakness. so that he relegated to his tutors, of which he had three or four, the drudgery of imparting to his 'young gentlemen' those fundamental instructions which afforded him no scope for the flights of his intellect.

Thus it was arranged that, as soon as any of his pupils emerged from the babyhood of learning, they were snatched up on to high and classical ground without the

slightest preparation.

In this manner, while struggling, perhaps, with the rudiments of geography, they were suddenly bidden to take wondrous account of the ethnologied families of man, their apportionment over the globe, the climates in which they lived, and the governments to which they were

subject.

While imbibing the details of English history, as propounded in the school primers, these bantlings found themselves treated, all at once, to a splendid digression upon primordial times, or upon Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, or Greece, accompanied with a panegyric upon Heroditus, Josephus, or the Attic sages, coming down, with an occasional swoop, into India or Tartary, to tell of the Great Mogul or Tamerlane, and finishing off, perhaps, with some dazzling story by Marco Polo or a flourish upon Prestor John. In the same way, while studying, to the best of their small abilities, the winds and tides and the forces of gravitation and attraction, he bounded off with his pupils into the illimitable expanses of astronomy, halting at only the nearest fixed star, pecking bird-like amongst the constellations, or bestriding the tail of a comet, while he circled them round the sun.

The same antics prevailed in arithmetic. Before they could master the rule of three and bookkeeping, they were landed amongst logarithms and the mysteries of trigonometry, the differential calculus and the *pons asinorum*,—themselves a bridge of asses of the most ludicrous kind.

Before they had acquired the merest rudiments of English grammar, they were set to spouting Greek and Latin phrases and fribbling with Sophocles and Plato!

It was all very amusing to those boys, even if their heads did swim sometimes with the multitudinous waters of knowledge thus rushing in upon them at every turn.

Though they failed to comprehend, they rather liked it; it gave them such good opportunity for trumpeting and

display; they could make such a fine showing at the 'public examinations,' when careful, astute Mr Fledger would lead them out, with a dexterous hand, for broadcast exhibition; while they trod deftly over the stepping-stones he had previously laid down for them, lest they should flounder into the surrounding pool of their own disabilities, and involve their master and themselves in shame Be sure that, for his own sake, he never and disgrace. probed them too deeply, never rummaged in their 'knowledge-boxes' with an open hand. Thus and thus, with Mr Fledger, did his 'young gentlemen' hammer and abraze the harder surfaces of learning and gather up the chips and the scobs, while they left its inner substance untried and pretermitted, missing thereby the heart in everything—its glory and its chief reward; unless, indeed, they found it in that yearly signal recompense which, to possess, was the acme of their school-boy happiness and the tangible proof of their master's 'affectionate regard,' as he always made a point of informing them; to wit—the gaudily-bound, gilt-bedizened volume, the school prize, which was so redolent of small wisdom, proper counsel, or 'deeds of high emprise,' and was duly touched off and finished with their principal's diploma, manifest upon the fly-leaf and stamped with the seal of the academy. A registered approval, this, that should stand them in good stead with their parents and friends for the whole succeeding year, and it would read, you know, something like this:-

Presented to Master So and So,

As a reward for diligence, application, attention or proficiency in his studies at Waltonbury House Academy, with the earnest hope that it may prove an incentive to greater endeavours and successes in the future,—By his Friend and Tutor,

FREDERICK HORATIO FLEDGER, Ph.D.F.S.A.M.C.P. Xmas 186—

The which affectionate exordium was inscribed in their 'Friend and Tutor's' most masterly, unapproachable style; for he was an excellent writer, in the literal sense, and seldom missed an opportunity for displaying his agility in

scrolls and flourishes, his 'proficiency' in all the feats and flections of the caligraphic art.

Independent, however, of the regular school training, or exploiting, as I have described to you, Mr Fledger used to favour his scholars with a weekly lecture, lasting a whole afternoon, that he might fill to overflowing their cornucopias of knowledge, and that their friends might be present and hear for themselves what a learned and affable gentleman he was.

In these discourses, he roamed adventuresome throughout the sciences, and made incursions in the realms of ethics and the arts. It was all too grand, and I tell you, the vanity and self-assurance of the man were really remarkable; it would have been hard to find his equal in his own peculiar way, and the more I consider the matter, the more persuaded am I, that your great pedagogue, like your true poet, 'is born, not made.'

Chemistry, electricity, geology, physics, pneumatics, optics, acoustics, hydraulics, botany, astronomy, anatomy, zoology, micrology, and minerology, with galvanism, magnetism, and all the other ics, isms, and ologies which have ever been devised, were snatched hold of and handled by Mr Fledger in his own airy and characteristic style. You learnt little, it was true, but you were amused a good deal, especially if you had a lively sense of humour.

Chemistry was his especial hobby, with its occasions for clap-trap experiments and surprises. For a while he set all the school making experiments; some of a dangerous kind, and as a consequence several of the boys were badly cut by bursting jars, and others had their fingers poisoned with acids, or their eyebrows and lashes singed off by the explosion of inflammable gas. Then he initiated his 'young gentlemen' in the mysteries of the steam-engine, and a good many of his boys became experimental engineers, with more or less painful results. Afterwards, the wonders of the microscope had their turn. Then it was electricity, and the scholars stood up in groups to be electrified, and mounted glass-legged stools to see each other's hair stand on end, and to flash blue sparks from their knuckles.

Entymology, too, had its share of patronage, with its butterfly nets, its pins, pasteboard boxes and camphor,

and its galloping excursions, over hill and dale, to trap 'entymological specimens.' Then, forsooth, came lectures upon landscape-painting in water-colours, illustrated with a copious display of his own work, for I must tell you Mr Fledger was quite a dexterous dabbler in the art.

Astronomy, too, claimed its quota of attention, and there were trampings about the country with telescopes, frosty roads and 'milky ways,' eclipses of the moon, transits of Venus, and what not; you'll excuse me if I mix things up a little, they are so confusing. But, oh! those were glorious times for the pupils, and they made the

very most of them.

Mr Fledger supplemented his lectures with diagrams, apparatus and experiments innumerable, and in process of time the schoolroom walls were hung round with cartoons and coloured pictures, illustrating almost every subject under the sun: the gaunt anatomies of men and animals, the arterial, venous and nervous systems, centrifugal pumps, hydraulic lifts, optical phenomena, orders of architecture, marine, stationary and locomotive engines, with the varied wonders of the microscope—fleas, flies, scorpions and beetles in countless varieties, and magnified hundreds of times. Besides these, there were coloured prints of all the wild animals—antedeluvian monsters and denizens of the deep-with the carriages and conveyances of the whole earth: sledges, droshkies, palanquins, jinrikishas, and iaunting-cars, balloons, steam-boats and diving-belts, mixed up with wind-mills, water-mills, and printing-presses.

In addition to all this there was a 'laboratory,' apart from the schoolrooms, the shelves of which were crammed with scientific toys and apparatus: jars, retorts and stoppered bottles, test tubes, syringes, syphons, pestles and mortars, crucibles and chafing dishes, lenses, forceps and glass tubing: galvanic and voltaic batteries, electrical machines, Leyden jars, amalgam pads, discharging rods, magnets, insulators, pith-balls, pulleys, wheels, cubes, cones, levers, fulcrums, inclined planes, wedges, tripods, spirit-lamps, Florence flasks, exhausted receivers, bibulous paper, 'Prince Rupert's drops,' and 'Pharaoh's serpents,' with many other things which it is beyond me to enumerate, though I think I have done pretty well; while around the walls were hung more diagrams, explanatory charts, records

of experiments and chemical symbols, particularly prized by Mr Fledger on account of their learned and abstruse appearance. You never saw anything equal to the precious medley outside of a public museum.

The aspect of the school, as a result of all these decorations, was certainly very imposing, and the boys all enjoyed it. They didn't understand a moiety of the learned things set forth, not even the biggest of them, yet they cherished the idea that they were somehow included within the zone of all this glory, persuaded that they too shone, if only by reflection, in the splendour of this scientifical effulgence.

CHAPTER II

A TRITON AMONG THE MINNOWS

Being a great man, Mr Fledger was not without some of the foibles of great minds, so that in this respect he was honourably consociated. He had obtained for himself abroad, at no heavy cost to brain or pocket, the not very weighty degree of doctor of philosophy, and had, as you have seen, placed its initials at the head of his other adornments—which, like a kite's tail, were intended to give steadiness and dignity to his prospective upward course. On the strength of this diploma, therefore, and by reason, too, of his former professorship of caligraphy at Burton's College, he used frequently to don the serge gown and 'mortar-board,' and I wonder the gown was not a scarlet one and his mortar-board tasseled with crimson silk. It may be that he was not anxious to court inquiry as to his credentials. At anyrate, all was decorous, subordinate black.

Equipped with this fetching piece of charlatanry and brimful of needless objurgations and commands, he would start forth, brisk and fresh, at the head of his 'academy' as it emerged like a great black serpent from his gates of learning, to wend its way on Sunday mornings to the

Abbey Church, or on high-days and holidays to make some staid excursion into the country; and he would swell, as he stomped along, with the dignity and importance of it all, himself the cynosure of every eye, the consciously beheld of all beholders; and as these progresses were arranged chiefly for the public gaze, you may be sure that Mr Fledger instilled into his boys beforehand much befitting unction and propriety.

He would say just before starting, 'I hope now, I do hope—for the honour of the academy—that no young gentleman of mine will so far forget himself as to laugh or talk, or otherwise misbehave, while walking to or from the Abbey or during his presence at divine service. I've very little hopes of a boy who would do such things; nevertheless, I shall lay the cane sharply across the back of any boy

who does.'

The master, you see, was rather vindictive when he felt that his personal interests were at stake, and held that the

honour of the 'academy' was especially his own.

In this way, equally admonished and threatened, his 'young gentlemen' usually succeeded in pulling their faces to the length required for the safety of their backs, and otherwise, in acting for the occasion with that automaton-like decorum which Mr Fledger expected of them, as walking advertisements for his school.

Mr Fledger had a knack of using his canonicals with telling effect in quite a variety of ways, although the following example will show you the skip-jack character

of the man.

When the boys, with their parents and friends, would all be assembled in the schoolroom to hear one of the master's lectures, he would often keep them waiting half an hour on the tip-toe of expectancy, while they gazed at the display of abstruse apparatus, spread out in front of them, on the Olympian heights supporting his desk. Then of a sudden, he would burst into the room, begowned and becapped, and, while affecting to toss off indifferently his scholastic impedimenta, would explain with profuse apologies that he had only just been able to tear himself away from a conclave of 'old-time chums and professors,' and I do assure you the effect upon his audience was remarkably nice, for it assumed thereupon a respectful

forbearance while the great man wiped his forehead with his glistening silk handkerchief, cleared his throat, drank a tumbler of water, jingled his jars, tripods and retorts together, kindled taper or spirit-lamp, and otherwise prepared things for the jugglery and jargon that was about to follow.

Now, I venture to remark, sotto voce that, could we have peeped in at his parlour window, only a little while before, we should have beheld Mr Fledger put on his gown and mortar-board as hastily as he had now so theatrically cast them off, and we should have understood that the learned conclave with the 'professors' included nothing more academical than a noisy altercation with his turbulent wife and unruly children; 'chums' these were, indeed, such as he could hardly hope to shake off; 'professors' these who out-mastered the master in everything.

Wherefore, let me murmur a fervent benison on the protecting charity of the domestic window-blind which, when closely drawn, doth hide so many of our fardels and frailties from the ken of all save the ubiquitous story-teller—the burdensome, the gross, the mean, and the shabby doth it decently conceal, yet leaveth us free to rear a splendid fabric on the wide outside, and to escape in

part to that illusory castle.

Mr Fledger had another little weakness in favour of a silver ruler, from which he never parted company during class-time unless it were to unlimber his cane and

administer a general or particular thrashing.

He explained to his boys that this ruler had been presented to him by the students at Burton College as an especial mark of their appreciation, esteem, affection, etc., a very long etcetera, which was certified by an inscription upon the said ruler, and which he took good care should be often readable by them *in extenso*, leaving it occasionally on the desks about the schoolroom, or, inadvertently, as it seemed, on the sacred domain of his writing-table, well knowing that when his back was turned nimble fingers would be busy with it.

He was excessively fond of flourishing this ruler upon every available occasion. It was the *primum mobile* in everything he did. He would bring it down with a flash

upon the lid of his desk when he called the school to order. He would swing it about him like a bandmaster with his bâton, in the midst of his perorations to the classes, so as to give point and emphasis to his remarks. It tapped the boys on the shoulder or poked them in the ribs by way of encouragement or exhortation, and, quite as often, descended upon their knuckles with disapproving vehemence. It pointed incisively at maps and diagrams; it rapped by way of reminder on the insides and outsides of books and the corners of slates, and, like a harlequin's wand, kept the machinery of the school in a flurry all day long.

Mr Fledger's system of rewards and punishments was open to serious objection. He had learned a process of coating pasteboard with a liquid preparation of red sealingwax, which, when dried, presented a very smart appearance. So he prepared many hundreds of tickets by this process, and stacked them for use in a cupboard beneath his desk. Now in the course of a day a 'good, attentive boy' would receive five or six of these vouchers, and a 'very bad' ditto would be minus the same number, with plenty of grades between.

The 'young gentlemen' carried them about in their pockets, and at the end of every month there was a reckoning-up day, when Mr Fledger, with befitting gravity, would spread out a great book before him, inscribed with the names of the scholars, with spaces left between for annotations and remarks,—condign, benign or qualitative; it was a veritable doomsday book. Every pupil was now required to unload himself of his tickets to be passed again into the cupboard treasury, the number he had possessed being credited to his name in the book, and it was understood that those boys who had the greatest number of markers entered to their names at the end of the year, would receive the biggest prizes. This was the theory, though not the practice, for the sons of well-to-do parents who patronised the numerous 'extras' on the school course always secured the most splendrous token of Mr Fledger's 'affectionate regard,' however little they might have merited them; while, on the other hand, there were boys whose credits must have figured very high, but whose friends' pockets were at a low ebb, to whom the yearly token of praise was of the most meagre description; and when the award to such a boy was so insignificant that he could, upon its gracious bestowal, hide it away in his breast pocket as he slunk back to his seat, you can fancy how jealous he was, and how angry with a sense of the injustice done him; how glad, too, amidst the boasting hilarity of his more fortunate schoolmates, to have the whole shabby business done with for another year.

But apart from the politic legerdemain Mr Fledger operated in the distribution of his prizes, his ticket-scheme was very objectionable, as it engendered a sort of cardboard currency in the school. Many of the younger boys would gamble away their tickets in games at 'marbles' or 'hop-scotch,' or part with them in exchange for a rosy-cheeked apple, a lump of 'stick-jaw,' or a pocket-knife, especially when those dainties were craftily exhibited and their merits dilated upon in out-of-the-way corners by their Machiavelian schoolmates of a larger growth.

Besides this, these markers were always being lost or stolen; by reason of which a frequent culpatory wail went up from the desks and floated about Mr Fledger's ears as he sat in his arm-chair aloft, as if to show him how badly his plan was working; yet it never crossed his mind to amend it, but when the collective plaint became too clamorous, he would swoop down upon the malcontents, ferule thrown aside and cane rampant, and slash every part of their unfortunate anatomies which they happened to offer as the readiest fender to his attack. Backs and knuckles, elbows, shins and knees were in this manner visited with a first-come-first-served desperate and general onslaught, when tranquillity would reign for a time over the whole school, broken here and there only by an occasional moan or a tearful mumbled whisper, in smothered testimony to the master's prowess.

Although not a constant fighter, Mr Fledger was sometimes subject to a vertigo of combativeness. Of course it will not be forgotten that the fighting, when it did occur, was all on one side; that the conflict was never hurled back upon himself, yet this consideration should in no wise detract from the merit of his bellicose encounters, because we cannot prove that our master, masterful as he was in everything, would have failed to sustain his side of the

combat, the once he was pledged to it; after he had 'crossed the Rubicon,' as he used to say, even if the school had been a phalanx of fighting athletes, which it was not.

Mr Fledger was usually in too exalted a state for any mere physical contest to be tasteful to him, but he had a steady aversion to humped backs and rounded shoulders amongst the ranks of his scholars, whose hinder parts were so much before his eyes, and this antipathy furnished him with a nice pretext for keeping his arm in training, and his

cane supple for more serious work.

He would, therefore, frequently unthrone himself and dash along the desks while the boys were engrossed with their slates and copybooks, and land a sound thwack (with an extra one, on the carpet-beating principle, for each dusty jacket) across every bent pair of shoulders, or every prone or supine figure he could find, and they were always sufficiently numerous. It was done with such celerity that half the school would be set a-wriggling simultaneously under the impact of this summary visitation. 'Sit up! sit up! all of you!' he would shout; 'we want no hunchbacks here.' Then he would clamber again into the heights of his rostrum, and turning on his heel, would survey the effects of his handiwork, before sitting down again, with grim and masterful satisfaction.

There were days, however, when the clouds of war took on a deeper cast, and his pupils' instincts, sharpened as they were by many a similar experience, told them that things were going to be ugly. Let me describe one of these occasions, as besides being typical of the rest, it led

to remarkable consequences.

There had been a battle-royal at the breakfast table that Mr Fledger had just left, and though his silk handkerchief went repeatedly and vehemently to his nose and mouth, it seemed powerless to wipe away the savour of that hot breakfast, and he strode into the schoolroom, palpitating to the finger-tips with the outrage of his marital defeat.

The trouble had cropped up the evening before—some domestic remissness on his part, in consequence of which he had been constrained to listen to a curtain lecture delivered to him by Mrs Fledger in the small hours of the morning, a time when he should have been sunk in a dignified slumber, or, at the worst, dreaming vaguely of

logarithms or lepidopteræ, conic sections or crucibles. He had been compelled, I say, beneath the shades of his bedcurtains, to give heed to a lecture in which he could hardly get a word in edgeways, either of comment or dissent, so that he had arisen abruptly at the earliest dawn and had gone downstairs and walked about in the dining-room until the morning repast was ready, which, bringing him a second rendering of the lecture, he had essayed to enliven it with some rousing remarks of his own that resulted only in his additional defeat and humiliation. So he stalked into the schoolroom, fiercely determined to provide himself with an aftermath which should redound to his better advantage, not this time, it was true, at his own gentle fireside, but on a broader field, amidst clashing slates and tumbling books, the shuffling of restless feet, the humming and drumming of the classes, the categorical droning of the teachers, and all the dusty bustle of Waltonbury House Academy in full swing. Yes; this was an establishment of which he proudly told himself, 'I am the principal. In this domain, therefore, I will be a Titan; battle shall mean victory and renown. Wherefore, let me to arms! I will habilitate this school-house as a temple devoted to me. Vie et armis / Vae victis!'—the terminal pedantry being always a necessity with Mr Fledger in putting the finishing touch to his more impressive locutions, for he was inordinately fond of cockcrowing in Latin axioms and phrases; and if I should, myself, give point to this narrative by allusions sometimes to the same classic wisdom, it is because I am anxious to be in harmony with my hero.

Well, then, to proceed. Mr Fledger came down into the schoolroom, burning with fury at his domestic defeat, and impatient to score a redeeming victory in his own little world. Wherefore, mounting his rostrum with eager haste, he scanned his busy fledglings round, looking for a first batch of victims. They were soon found. Then he sounded a clarion call to the fray in terms like these,—

'Ahem! Good-morning, all of you. I am sorry to say that I have noticed a great deal of disorderly conduct amongst my pupils lately, quite unusual and very disgraceful' (it was nothing of the kind). 'I see very plainly I must lay aside my usual arguments, and resort to the argumentum bacculinum' (he was referring to his cane,

which he was unhooking from his button-hole, and not to a club, but we will excuse him his inaccuracy for his delightsome Latin's sake). 'It gives me great pain to be forced to do this, but there's no alternative; you have yourselves to thank for it.' (The boys didn't believe in their master's painfulness, nor in their own culpability, but this didn't signify.)

'Now, Masters Dempster, Thisby senior, Laurence junior, Lomax primus and Whitelaw secundus, I've been watching you for some time, and you've been laughing and talking to each other, instead of attending to your duties, and this sort of thing in school hours, eh! Mr Sheepshead, what do you report to me concerning those boys?'

Timid Nemo Sheepshead, sleek, mild and callow, took his cue on the instant. 'Well, sir, I can't report favourably about the young gentlemen. They are exceedingly insubordinate, and, in fact, sir,' catching the master's gratified look, 'I am sorry to say the whole of my class is very unruly this morning.'

'Oh, very well, Mr Sheepshead. So now, Masters Dempster, Thisby senior, Lawrence junior, Lomax primus, Whitelaw secundus, and the rest of you at that desk.—Salter, Perkins and Memlo Tertius, isn't it? And who's that boy at the end there, Sheepshead?'

'That, sir, is Master Newcome—a fresh pupil, sir' (he

looked as fresh as a green thing should).

'Oh, very well, Master Newcome, then, and all the rest

of you. I say,—come up!'

Whereupon there was a heaving of unwilling backs and a slow emergence of dismal faces from the rows of scholars, succeeded by a shambling procession of the depraved and doomed towards the platform, which was a staging two feet high and twenty feet square at the head of the school, and formed the base of our Solon's pedestal, which rose pyramidically some ten feet above it.

'Stand back, here; be quick,' shouted Mr Fledger, as, warming to his work, he planted the advancing squad like a row of ninepins along the wall. 'I'll attend to you presently.' Then he sallied forth wrathfully to 'do the rounds of the schoolroom' as was his wont every morning, and to weed out and send up another swarm of trans-

gressors.

Descending upon the scaligraphy class,' he bore down like an incubus upon each boy's back to look over at his writing, his left arm stretched out on the desk in front, while with his right he snatched the scholar's pen and executed a fine scroll with it or a capital letter in his copybook, by way of flourish or example. Then, turning over the leaves from back to front, he would exclaim, 'I perceive, sir, that you get worse and worse with your writing, and yet, sir, you are very rapid with it-much too rapid. You have the cacoethes scribendi, and it must be taken out of you.' Then he disentrailed the unfortunate book, crushed up the leaves in his hands and dashed them to the floor. 'There, sir! there! I'm ashamed of your work, and you shall not take it home for your parents to see! Go up, sir, go up!' giving the unfortunate pupil a stiff slash across the back to hasten the desired ascension and as an earnest of what was in store for him. While thus engaged harrying the boys in front, his sharp ears detected a whispering behind him, and turning on his heel, he descried a little coterie of the elder scholars anxiously discussing the outlook, in view of this platform punishment now under way.

'What, sirs! Talking matters over, behind my back?' he exclaimed. 'How dare you? You are old enough to set this academy a better example; Masters Braddington, Percival, Pukeley and Aldermaston, go up, sirs! every one of you. I see you are all particeps criminis in this scandalous insubordination,' and those leaders of the school were constrained to follow the prevailing trend, which they did with flushed faces and in haughty silence. Then our pedagogue passed on to the next desk, and to the next, to light upon some other offender every little while, in flagrante delicto,

and to despatch him upwards in consequence.

But when it came to the turn of the arithmetic class, I tell you it was something dreadful. Complex calculations, the result of laborious application the evening before, would be wiped off the slate in the twinkling of an eye, and the unfortunate would be on his way to the platform, slate in hand and impositions ahead, before he could realise how it had all taken place. Rough hair, dirty hands, or collars and jackets a little out of gear, were all sufficient pretexts with Mr Fledger for swelling the ranks of the unfortunate, and in twenty minutes from the time he took the matter in

hand, half the school was huddled together on the platform like a flock of sheep penned up for the slaughter—a lugubrious, comical crowd that would have furnished a delightful study for a physiognomist. But the winnowing process was complete, and the principal strode back to his platform. He had hurled out the offenders for the furnace of his wrath, was fortified by a big sense of duty in course of accomplishment, and brimful of eagerness for the lictorial exploits he was about to undertake.

'Amblesides,' shouted the great man, as he mounted the platform, 'what have you got in your pocket, sir?'

Luckless Master Amblesides had been the very last to 'go up,' and his ungainly figure had failed to colligate with the rest of the felonial company, so that his pig-like profile stood out in relief, on the edge of the platform, before Mr Fledger's eyes. Now, Master A. was one of those young gentlemen who have an inveterate habit of carrying their personal property about with them, and upon this occasion the cherished valuables bulged out his trousers' pockets to such an extent as to render his fat and flabby legs unnoticeable by the contrast.

'Master Ámblesides, what have you in your pockets? Turn them out, sir; turn them out, at once.'

The boy laid his slate and book down on the platform and proceeded to ungorge himself, Mr Fledger's hands being spread out in readiness to receive the spoil. There emerged first a double handful of marbles, some of which spilt themselves over and rolled about the schoolroom floor, to be picked up and appropriated by the watchful pupils. An assortment of spinning tops was the next consignment, followed by about a pound of brass buttons of various styles, several 'nickers' and a 'chunk' of 'Everton toffee'; and the mouthings to which this last had been treated had reduced it to an agglutinous mass that was reeking with dirty scraps from the pupil's pocket. The master laid this trophy aside with thumb and little finger, feeling that with such a lineture too much contact threatened contamination. There followed two or three half-chewed apples, a lot of filbert nuts mixed up with school tickets, and a splendid new pocket-knife, which completed the sum of Amblesides's relinquishments, and filled Mr Fledger's joined and outstretched hands as he deported them to his desk above.

'Now, isn't this a disgraceful lot of trash?' demanded the master, as he turned and confronted his fledgling. 'These things show me, sir, what you've been doing lately; bringing fruit and sweetstuff with you to school, in defiance of my rules to the contrary, playing at those dirty, low-life games of 'buttons' and 'marbles,' and, I presume, with any young blackguard about the town who would play with you; grovelling on the pavements and making yourself a public nuisance and a reproach to this academy, sir! Have I not forbidden this sort of thing a thousand And then, to cap all, this pocket-knife in your possession—a dangerous, mischievous thing in any boy's hands. I have always set my face steadily against pocketknives, as you very well know. I suppose, sir, you are one of the young gentlemen who amuse themselves, at odd times, with hacking these desks and forms about?' waving his hand magnificently over the scarified furniture in question. 'Now, sir, I shall confiscate this rubbish—every bit of it '-tossing the marbles and mandibles, pocket-knife and all into the waste-paper basket—'and shall punish you besides for your contumacious behaviour.'

'Please, sir, I want my knife back,' blurted out Master Amblesides, in dogged desperation, 'father gave it to me

on my birthday.'

'I can't help that, sir; I can't help that. You may depend upon it, I shall keep the knife for the present, and I shall make it my business to talk to your father about it, at a fitting opportunity. Now hold out your hand, sir.'

The unfortunate paw was extended, whereupon there was a dexterous flash from the master's cane, followed by a little puff of dust, where the end of it struck the floor, and poor Amblesides shook his hand vigorously as if to fling off the

pain.

'Now, the other, sir.' The other hand was slopingly presented. 'Hold it well out, sir!' and the command being in a measure complied with, the benign treatment was duplicated. 'Now, the other again, sir.' That suffering member was again put forward, and the chastening process was repeated, both with that and the other hand, the result being a wilting and weeping yet altogether impenitent Amblesides. 'Now, sir, as to the other matter I sent you up for; hand me your slate.' The slate was

picked up and handed to the master. 'Give me your tutor.' The dog-eared tutor was handed to him. 'Well, sir, here you are: exercise 13—the simplest thing in the world—and nothing but your obstinacy prevents you from getting it correctly. The planet's periods and distances are given you: you know that the square of a quantity results in multiplying that quantity by itself, and the cube comes by multiplying the square by that. Now then, required to find the square of the planet's period, and the cube of its distance from the sun. Very well; you had only to apply the simplest rules of arithmetic to find that out. You have not done so, sir, but filled your slate with a medley of blundering figures. Perfectly inexcusable, sir. Now, if you please, work this all out again, then take numbers 14, 17, 23, and, let me see, 28 also' (he selected the last because he saw it was a teazer), 'and work them out, too, before you go home. And, now, sir'-laying half a dozen rapid and rousing slashes upon Master Amblesides's rounded shoulders, and across the well-filled seat of his trousers, as he turned to depart—'go back to your place, and be more attentive and diligent in future, or I shall repeat the punishment'; and our poor Amblesides, writhing underneath the pains of his chastisement, tearful, flushed, and covertly defiant, shambled off to his seat, making room for the next culprit, whose treatment was similar to his, and so on with the next and next; and for half an hour or more, it was a very carnival of correction; one could hear the vicious chops and flashes of Mr Fledger's cane all over the schoolroom, interluded with groaning excuses, sobs and fiery exhortations; while now and again, an extra dose of medicine was administered to some hardened or impudent offender; and out of the turmoil of this merciless conflict, a silent stream of the wounded took its painful ways back, to fill up the gaps of the attenuated school.

But when he came to deal with those four young aristocrats—Braddington, Percival, Pukeley and Aldermaston—Mr Fledger resolved that there should be an impressive scene. It was seldom that they graced the platform with their presence, unless by the master's invitation to inspect with him some microscopic curiosity or analytical wonder. Now that his temper had expended itself, he saw that he had made a mistake in sending them up at all. Should he

chastise these youths severely, he might seriously offend their parents, from whom he derived a considerable solatium in the course of a year. In fact, this cock was afraid of getting his comb clipped. Still, he had been excessively irritated by their unconcealed criticisms: it seemed to him to imply an assumption of equality on their parts; a liberty to discuss his methods which he could not permit, and he was determined to come out of his difficulty in the ascendant. So, like the wary veteran that he was, he mounted to higher ground, and proceeded to read them a touching lecture upon the grief they had caused him by their manifest sympathy with the evil-doers. It was all the more reprehensible, he said, because he knew they were capable of better things; and he did hope that, in future, they would spare him the necessity of inflicting upon them what was, after all, only a just punishment for their insubordination.

But that group of 'young gentlemen' listened to Mr Fledger's beautiful address without emotion—with an equanimity, indeed, that amounted to callousness; and when the finale was reached, and the master requested them, in a tone of tragic sorrow, to hold out their hands, they did so with the haughty indifference of 'noble Romans' confronting the torture, and quailed no more than they had reason to quail, upon receiving each that nerveless tap of the cane, for which all this rhetoric was intended to prepare them. 'The mountain in labour had brought forth a mouse,' and a pink spot on each boy's cheek gave the only token that he was affected, excepting in the case of Aldermaston, who was the oldest pupil in the academy, and whose dark flush of anger and scornful, curling lip gave promise of trouble in the future. . . .

Well, it was all over; those last offenders had marched back to their seats, and the principal of Waltonbury was left alone on the platform. So he limbered up his cane at the accustomed button-hole, and thrusting his hands into his trousers' pockets, took a few stately turns on his judicial preserves, enjoying the glow of triumph that tingled through his veins, as he dwelt upon his finished conflict—a battle so gallantly maintained, a victory so completely won—and reminded himself of Cæsar's famous words, 'Veni, vidi, vici,

—I came, I saw, I conquered,' and I will not deny that his heated and errant fancies may have pictured to him then a delicious tableau, nay, a metamorphosis, like this:—

His serge gown thrown off for a Roman toga; his 'mortar-board' tossed aside for a conqueror's crown; his trusty cane relinquished for the palm-branch of Victory; garlands of roses festooned upon his swelling breast; his citadel of learning transmogrified into a triumphal car, with himself for lord-recumbent; and all that delinquent school beneath him transanimated, as gay celebrants of his coming apotheosis. Even the platform under his feet, as yet the humble basis of his prowess, spreads out to fill a prouder plane for its master's sake, and lo! the classic ground of the Campus Martius expands before him, bathed in the southern sunlight, with all its grand surroundings—august, magnificent, complete; its shimmering sands, all tossed and trampled by the plunging war-horses, and the rush of men and of chariots; and his ears vibrate to the raucous music, to the chants of the priests and the songs and shouts of the multitude,—and this is all for him—all for him. 'Tis unapproachable, superb, supreme. His head swims. He has drunk too deeply of the strong wine of the gods. In Circes' arms he dies away.

Sweet dreams; day-dreams; Promethean fires and fancies;

is anyone so prosy as never to court them?

Nay, do not we often dance attendance upon Giant Aspiration that he may yield us something of his flimsy store, transcending all our needs? Something that shall be grander, sweeter, better, Best? And while that evil genius flaunts it far above us, he fosters the chimeras of our hearts, fans the smouldering fires of hopes preposterous, goads on each restless spirit to war against its accustomed good, and to be fretful always, insatiate throughout, till dissolution intervening, shuts down everything—our vain ambitions, fitful loves, and wild desires; uprooted then from our mother-soil and foreprized in the judgment of the Ages, we sink in the floods of Death, quenched and still, mutely fitted, sternly fated to garner our harvests on a farther shore.

CHAPTER III

THE HEEL OF ACHILLES

It is an axiom trite, yet true, that 'after a storm comes a calm,' and this is just how it was in the affairs of Waltonbury House Academy. By such an escapade as the foregoing, our principal had laid a soothing ointment upon his domestic sores, conceiving that he had, in a measure, vindicated himself. Hungering for his own praises, he had seized upon his scholars, and had fed himself a victory. They were the rungs in the ladder of his prerogative. Upon their abasement he had mounted to his glory. His spirit was fed, and he was satiated.

Moreover, our pedagogue was not vindictive, so that, in his ordinary humours, he liked better to patronise than to punish. Besides, a more genial sentiment may now have actuated him—a feeling that he had gone too far, had been too enthusiastic, we will say, in his penological enterprise; for it behooves that we soften, when possible, any shade of reproach which such exploits as these might cast upon our great man. Be this as it may, after such an affair as I have described to you, Mr Fledger's 'young gentlemen,' understanding him better than he did himself, looked for an increment in their master's condescensions, and usually they were not disappointed.

The silver ruler would find its way into his hands again, the executive principle making way for the didactic. This would be followed by a few sallies of his lame, infrequent wit—pleasantry in which the funniness would be more apparent to himself than to his scholars. Yet, a quasi-kindness was thus apparent, so that his boys accepted his witticisms at their ostensible value, glad of these advances in the interests of peace.

Then, upon the first available starlight night, he would invite them to take a stroll with him to the hilltops at the back of the town, that he might point out to them, not by any means for the first time, the various planets and constellations; theorise delightedly upon the comets and the asteroids, wax eloquent upon the marvels of the 'milky way' and the unseen splendour of the 'southern cross.'

At another time he would marshal them all in his back garden, rig up his telescope, and show them the mountains of the moon, Jupiter and his satellites and the rings of Saturn, and a day or two afterwards, perhaps, while reclining upon his judicial heights, he would hand down for their inspection, some latest acquisition of his, a vegetable or mineral curiosity, or the tooth of some rare animal; upon one occasion it would be a lump of pink felspar or a fragment of gold-bearing quartz; at another the presumptive egg of the great Auk or the bones of a dodo. He had an especial predeliction for all things marvellous, and nursed a belief in perpetual motion and the discovery of the philosopher's stone. The more incredible a thing might be, the more staunchly did he maintain his belief in it. The prodigies of nature and the achievements of man affected him phenomenally, such as water-spouts, icebergs, volcanoes and earthquakes, travellers' wonders, soldiers' conquests and the triumphs of inventors and discoverers in every field and of every age. So he kept his pupils' brains in a ferment over all the standard marvels and celebrities, with many of those which are apocryphal, taking no pains to weed fable from fact, providing he could raise all their eyebrows and set their mouths agape in absorbtive, juvenile wonder, and when any suggestion offered itself in the midst of his school routine he would plunge forthwith into some of his fancy themes and, led on by the association of ideas and excited by the noise of his own voice, he would frame the most outlandish hypotheses and indulge in speculations the most extravagant, interlarding his discourse with a plentiful garnishment of high-strung Latin phrases and words of many syllables; and it was not surprising that, in the course of these lofty and erratic flights, he induced the scholars to forget their punishments, while bringing the school round again to its prevailing conditions and courses.

Now, you would naturally suppose that Mr Fledger, by his recent conquests and subsequent retrocessions, having moulded affairs very much to his liking, so far as the 'academy' was concerned, would have had the sense to abstain for a while from any incursion into that particular domain in which an abundant and bitter experience should have taught him he had no jurisdiction; to wit, the fortalice of his own home, yea, Waltonbury House, distinct from the

'academy'; yet such was the singular fatuity of the man, that this incursion was the very thing he undertook, although as to how he did it, I will tell you by-and-by, merely saying this at present, with one or two other things, that the commonly accepted dogma that 'every man's house is his castle' did not obtain in our master's case, for Mr Fledger's house was Mrs Fledger's castle, or more accurately, the stronghold of herself and her sister. Now, I am aware, of course, there would be nothing extraordinary about that; but the singularity was-Mr Fledger's baseless, reckless and persistent assumption that he himself was its lord, so that every domestic rebuff was certain to be followed by a corresponding rebound, like the play of an indiarubber ball, giving his female regulators plenty of lively work, for, notwithstanding the wordy flagellations to which he was continually subjected, despite all the metaphorical kicks and cuffs he was in the habit of receiving, and the vanquishments which fell to his lot, he would still go on supposing that the place for which he had to pay a considerable rental every year, and the current expenses of which, under bipetticoat management, absorbed the most of his earnings, was rightfully his own! and this, mind you, although his furious endeavours in all the past had invariably failed to secure him the smallest prerogative therein. Mr Fledger was too old and experienced a man to be allowed any excuse for such a vagary; the scars and bruises of many a lost and desperate struggle should have taught him to yield gracefully to the inexorable.

Oh! fie then, Horatio, thou teacher victorious, who would never be taught; thou stern dispenser of a physic which turned thy very gall whenever thou wast compelled to swallow it thyself. Couldst thou not know thou wert only a suzerain chieftain after all, with thy sovereign lady hover-

ing o'er thee?

Tut! sir, from thy menacing, uplifted arm and trenchant cane the chains of thy bondage mockingly dangled, and all thy pompous footsteps around thy schoolroom did but mark the bounds of thy circumscribed authority; everywhere beyond was thy region of abasement.

CHAPTER IV

OLD-WORLD RESUSCITATIONS

'WALTONBURY Town' was a quiet old place of some fifteen thousand people. Being a cathedral town, situated in the midst of an agricultural district, its small activities were ecclesiastical and agrarian rather than mercantile; its daily traffic was unlively, and the grass grew in patches down the sides of some of its streets. There was little progressiveness of the money-hunting kind amongst its population. No flaring shop fronts were there, demanding inspection, no blatant signboards nor sprawling posters, excepting at election times, and occasionally in the outskirts when a circus or some other show was visiting it from London. By six o'clock in the evening, business was entirely suspended, if we except a little fuddling in the beer-shops, while at nine all was somnolent and quiet. Yet you must not conclude that the Waltonbury people were simply dolts; no shrewd observer living amongst them would have thought so. The venerable burgh contained many good, old-fashioned shops, well appointed and commodious, whose owners, while not raising an everlasting howl about the merits of their goods, understood perfectly well how to please their customers. Merchantable supplies were good and cheap, and provisions of every kind were excellent and abundant. You were never cajoled into purchasing what you did not require, and it would seem that trade under such conditions may possibly partake of what is dignified—as much as any higgling, huckstering process ever can; for the practice of buying a thing from someone at the smallest price you can induce him to sell it to you for, and disposing of it to somebody else for as much as is selfishly wise to make him pay for it, is not in the abstract a dignified avocation, however indispensable it may be proved to be.

A distinctive feature of the old town was its perfect cleanliness. The raised stone pavements, with their trim grass swards sloping down to the roadways; the steps opposite each door leading down to the street; the white posts and chains which bounded many of the side walks; the brass door-sills, handles and knockers, and frequent name-plates were all kept scrupulously clean. The roads themselves were regularly swept and in the summer time watered, and the houses in the main portion of the town bearing though they did many a mark of age and freak of old-world builder, were never suffered to lapse into neglectful decay. spirit of the old fabrics was always preserved; oaken beam, moulded stucco, quaint brickwork and leaden casements were renovated and restored, while the customary snowwhite curtains and bright galaxy of flowers at the upper windows bore evidence of the wholesome, soulful life of the womankind within. Let us emulate this practical reverence for the old and quaint, for these dumb, yet speaking relics of our forefathers, whose simple, forceful lives have therein left a graven history. Let us quietly interpret for ourselves, whenever we may, those dear old home-stalls analogical, so as to realise in verisimilitude the character and bias of 'Ye Olden Time,' feel something of its native hardihood, its thoroughness, its straightness, its lack of 'ifs' and 'buts, its domestic cosiness and relish for the picturesque withal. We owe our forefathers nothing less than this loving retrospection; for they are our bulwarks of the past; our brave pioneers in many a doubtful path; our martyrs in many a righteous cause, and the sum of all we boast of to-day is but the vital expansion of their master germs. Nor let us disremember our gentlewomen of other days, in their endowment of the humble, ordinary things around them with the gracious attributes of fitness and sufficiency; their feminine interests extended to each small thing proprietary, and every belonging, according to its measure, moulded and harmonised by the afflux of their practical, dutiful lives, not relegated to the offices of the hireling, nor those failing, consigned to the land of limbo.

Nor let us presume that the soul of these small prudences afforded no sweeter blessing than the ordinary garnishment of outward things, for the hand that gives point and careful purpose to each affair domestical belongs especially to her whose gentle heart, so truly heaven-prompted, enacts throughout the years a thousand dear complaisances, looking to the benefit of those she loves.

How beautiful, how womanly is this holy culture of the heart. Let us render to ourselves a picture of its worth and blessedness. . . .

Waltonbury's Abbey Church was at once its pride and its raison d'être.

Compared with edifices of its kind in other parts of the country, I should describe it as being more massively stern than architecturally beautiful; yet this majestic pile had always been the chief attraction of the old burgh to which it lent a dignity all its own; for the town had grown up insensibly around it by the occasions and accretions of centuries past.

The abbey stood upon gently rising ground, in a 'close' of good extent which, with the houses surrounding it, was

known as the 'abbey precincts.'

The building was of the early Norman style. The nave and transept were short and broad, and the chancel was formed in a semi-circle to the east, and pierced by five narrow, lofty, round-topped windows. The central tower was wanting, although the two huge western towers, with their rounded turrets, heavy battlements and tunnel-like windows near the summits, made ample amends for its absence, for they rose stately and grey, like giants of a bygone age, far above all their environments, overlooking every part of the town, and many miles of the rich and rolling country out beyond.

The whole fabric, with its squat, semi-circular arches, zigzag mouldings and deep-set windows, suggested the harsh insecurity of a period when internicine fighting was the urgent business of men's lives, and as you gazed up at the crumbling yet sturdy edifice, all ghostly and cold in the twilight, you could imagine you heard the old-time curfew 'tolling the knell of parting day,' leading you back, in fancy, to Norman conqueror and Saxon thrall, to fierce knights in chain armour and conical helmets, swinging their battle-axes and double-handed swords, to heavily prancing horses and emblazoned shields, and glittering lances and pennons, and to all the 'gentle' savagery, pomp and paraphernalia of the early warfare and passages of arms.

How often had those rude warriors assembled in stormy array within these abbey precincts, and made the welkin to ring and the pious monks to quake with their battle-cries and martial clangour, eager to be headed on to some

deed of 'chivalry' and carnage.

Yes, indeed, when those old walls were new.

Or, peradventure, a raging contest would surge up to the very gates of the church itself, and some of the vanquished, struck down by furious sword or battle-axe, would cling with frenzied fingers to pillar or fretted ornament, while vainly craving the mercy of the Holy Sanctuary, and would be cleft to the chine by their pitiless foes, upon the very steps of the great doorway, the uplifted, trembling hands of the abbot himself, his commands and anathemas unavailing. Yes, when those old walls were bright and clean saving that defilement of human blood. And afterwards, when all the tragedy of their lives was done, those graceless ruffians would be brought with martial pomp to fester beneath this holy fane, for with largesse most profuse had they gilded their way to absolution, and the crafty monks builded them chantries which they filled with holy songs for the good of their knightly souls, while their bodies lay a-rotting under saintly monuments, guarded with angels and cherubim and canopied with bloody battle flags. And our venerable temple, we will fancy, was sensible of these things, and knew she was polluted.

Aye, aye, my Lords Eustace-de-this and Sir Tracy-de-that, there mouldereth your unholy dust, though centuries since have passed away. And long years afterwards, yet still in sanguinary times, when knights and gentlemen-at-arms, though grown more courtly, were scarcely less ferocious, there went down many, in their Norman pride, to fight in the wars in Jewry; and some of these were laid away in the chapels and chancels of many an old abbey like this, while their pious effigies, cross-legged and supplicant, reposed in unison upon their sculptured tombs. There were two of these at

Waltonbury.

But lingering about the old fane were gentler memories—memories, not of pride, but of sorrow; not of the lust of conquest, but of humble supplication. Mothers, widows, wives and sweethearts had knelt upon the steps of her altars, or fallen prone there in piteous wrestlings with their God, imploring that He would strengthen them to bear their miseries, or that He would preserve their dear ones, and bring them safely home again; for the men had hied them headstrong to the wars, and for years, peradventure, they had gained no tidings of their lords and masters; or they

had learnt that they had been slain, or had succumbed to pestilence, or had died under torture in a foreign land.

Alas for the women of those times! The whole ordinance of things was utterly against them, and they could only submit and hope against hope, and be lacerated and worn by afflictions.

Along with the joys they might ever snatch, came the dread of impending sorrow. They must have felt it in every rank; jewelled lady and clouted peasant must have been equally comprehended in that heritage of grief.

And our abbey had known these tribulations within her walls; the tears of these sufferers had fallen before her shrines, and she became cold and grey and stern to look upon. What wonder? Such things should have caused

her very stones to weep. . . .

But in later times they brought to the abbey's shades the poets and scholars and gentlemen who had lived and learned and sung in all the country-side, and these were mostly men of gracious memories, and unstained lives, as many a marble slab and figured monument along its walls so piously attested, and we will fancy that our old fane had seen all this besides in solemn, mute approval; for each summer's day, as the sun went down in the golden west, she shed the beauties of her pictured windows-haloed saints or Saviour crucified—on to those sacred monuments there, and the blended, evanescent lights illumed each marble face, each ruff and scroll and epitaph, with soft and mellow colours, richly multiplied, so gladsomely, so sweetly. 'Twas a vestiture of harmonies, a rainbow-setting ere the darkness, the emblem of a hope, the token of a promise, forebye the coming dawn. . . .

And the weddings and churchings and shrivings galore, the solemn functions and gorgeous festivals, priestly benificence and priestly greed, make up the finish of this 'strange, eventful history,' this cursory chronicle of an old abbey; while now and again, throughout its chequered course, a master-spirit stands forth, this one malevolent, that one divine; and the strength and weakness, courage and cowardliness, cruelty and charity—living faith and lethal superstition—in short, the many-phased humanity of it—fills one's heart with a medley of emotions. Whether to laugh or

to weep, pity or condemn, revere or abhor, we know not, and find ourselves prompted to do each by turns, until our variant ebullitions die down in seething quietness; yet, out of the vexèd sea of our souls' unrest, these low, sad monotones are widely calling—Whence? Whither? What?—while from all the immeasurable expanse around us, alive as it is with mysteries interminable, there comes no final answer.

Then, good-bye ye olden time. Vale, thou grey and aged abbey. A presentment art thou of our old and tried mortality. Surely thy teachings contradict thee. So crumble not

down into thy original-dust ere thou shakest off the cerements of thy past, that humankind may read thy lessons

in the light of eternal truth. . . .

While venturing the above remark, methinks I see our neglected Fledger standing off in perspective, and beckoning me back to him, with many a threatening gesture and much irritable handling of his trusty cane.

Doubtless he feels that distance makes him look abominably small, without investing him with any of that enchantment which it lends to things in the general view. Still, compose yourself, my master. Consider that a hankering for variety is inherent in our human nature, that possibly we have been surfeited with your surpassing sweetness, and require a tonic to restore us to that zestful condition in

which we may enjoy you again.

We know that you are of the order of men who, if they fail to gain praise or adulation, would prefer censure, even ridicule, to the bane of total neglect. Yet, never fear, sir. Curb your impatience a trifle longer. Nay, possess yourself with that loftiness of soul which we have come to understand is your abiding characteristic, and we will make you such amends for our truancy that you may hope, before we have done with you, for a cosy little niche in the Temple of Fame, or, more fittingly, to be pedestalled in some special Valhalla for glorified schoolmasters, possibly within hailing distance of 'Dotheboys' Hall and of cognate 'Squeers' of gentle memory. . . .

So let us leave the precincts of the abbey, and bend our footsteps up secular High Street unto its farthest limits, for there we shall arrive at that proud seat of learning, set upon a commanding eminence—that wondrous compendium of things old and new, which is the final goal of our wanderings—Waltonbury House Academy, to wit,—that notable and scholarly foundation that links so admirably the present with the past, and demands the attention of all who approach it, or dwell anywhere, indeed, within the zone of its glories. . . .

CHAPTER V

OUR FAIR GYMNASIUM-ITS HALLS AND COURTS

WALTONBURY HOUSE was a kindly old place, with its steep, quaint gables, grouped and massive chimneys and mullioned windows. It could never have aspired to equality with the prouder mansions of its age and style, yet it was not wanting in dignity and proportional grace. It was a relic of the early Tudor times.

'Births and deaths, with lives between, Of many a master it had seen.'

In the happier days of yore the lands around it, far and wide, were included in its domain, but it was closed in now on every side by the buildings of the town, and a single acre of the surrounding soil was all that remained to it.

The former squires, under stress of misfortune, had one by one parted with the bulk of their patrimony, and the untoward course of subsequent years had completed the family ruin. Finally, the last scion of the house had tired of his starveling inheritance, and had departed—he and his—for lands unknown, the old demesne passing into the hands of aliens.

For many years afterwards it had been tenanted by a country barrister, but when he died his family moved away, and the old house was left unoccupied for a long time, until, almost fortuitously, it fell into the hands of the Fledgers, and—Ichabod!—its remaining glories soon disappeared.

The building was of two storeys, and of red brick, of that mellow tinge which time always gives to such fabrics in the country, while greenish-grey and purple lichens marked it over with the multivarious records of winter storm and summer shine.

Under the rolling clouds and intermittent sunlight of England's skies, it had all the charmful versatility with which you could possibly invest it, and however sombre its

changeful tints, it never had the cast of dirtiness.

There was little embellishment about the old home, no display over the mullioned windows or the low and massive doorway. A heavy projecting architrave running round the house, under the roof, with numerous dips and angles, a curious ray carving of Phœbus above the bay window, which jutted out solidly upon the lawn, and two or three engrailed scrolls and heavy oaken brackets, which in places supported the upper storey, comprised the whole of its ornaments. Still, the proportions of this venerable mansion were architecturally just, and its blemishes few, while altogether perfect was its air of repose.

The southern side of the house was covered with a vast ancestral vine, and the big square trellis, which climbed the back of the premises, supported a wealth of climbing roses, jessamine and Virginia creeper, blended and interlaced in

wild, yet delicate, profusion.

The old slate roof had been of a blanched and lustrous grey, patched with yellow stone-crop and russet-brown mosses, clotted and velvety, harmonious and picturesque; but in an access of gratuitous deviltry, Mrs Fledger and her sister thought 'it would be better to have the dirty old roof scraped and whitewashed; it would keep the bedrooms cool of summer nights, and make it look nice and clean.'

So, one fine day, by dint of painters' knife and scraper, off tumbled the lichens and the stone-crop, and, presto! on went the sloppy lime-wash over gabled roof and chimney-stack, sousing everything; and lo! on the following morning, all above the walls of the poor old place was hideously, hopelessly, damnably white, while the heroines of this exploit stood off at a little distance, with arms a-kimbo, chuckling at the foul mogrification, and congratulating each other at the beautiful sight of their finished enterprise.

'Yes, mum,' quoth the dog of a painter to Mrs Fledger, wiping his chaps with the back of his hand, while pretending to clean up a bit, 'it do look very nice, now it's dry, though I rather liked the 'pearance of the old roof, myself.'

But the poor old mansion was fated to suffer a climax of indignities soon afterwards. Pelion was piled upon Ossa,

for our preceptor himself, anxious to be felt upon the whole face of things, and resolving, with emulous pertinacity, not to be thrown into the shade by his better-half's glaring experiment, had a huge signboard fixed up over the top of the house, about seventy feet long, extending from one end to the other, and supported by stout iron posts and braces, so as to rise, triumphant and wind-proof, high above the roof and chimneys.

It was of a brilliant blue; the huge lettering upon it, fresh from the master's hand, and the heavy moulding around it, were of a vivid crimson, and it made you the grand announcement, 'Waltonbury House Academy,' and set you forth, in extenso, our principal's status and qualifications, all in Roman capitals, four feet high (our Fledger was a noble Roman in everything); and as this flaming pageant faced Waltonbury's long, straight High Street at right angles, it was perfectly readable, nay, assaulted the eye and insisted upon being read, by even the most heedless of gazers, to its uttermost extent, and indeed continued to be an object of wonder along several miles of country road beyond; and bearing in mind, as I trust you will, the quiet and decorous character of the town, with its picturesque old buildings and the venerable pile of the Abbey Church, whose time-worn towers rose solemnly in the centre, you may judge for yourself as to the enormity, the impudent incongruity, the shameless hideosity of that emblazonment, amid wide surroundings, where nothing else that met the eye was false or meretricious.

But this was not to be all; for casting about him to see where he could bestow a final flourish of his masterly hand, Mr Fledger found an inviting opportunity at the lofty gates of the mansion. These gates were of beaten ironwork, very elaborate and handsome, and set between massive, red-brick pillars, which were surmounted by the globes and heavy copestones of the Tudor style. These gates swung to with a ponderous weight-and-chain attachment after they had been pushed or pulled open; and on each side of them, and included in their scrollwork, was a long conical extinguisher, set out at a convenient angle, for the link-boys to thrust their torches into, after lighting 'quality' home perhaps, of winter nights in the olden time; and although the fine hammered work of these gates was badly rusted, and in places twisted or broken, this dignified entrance was the chief architectural feature about Waltonbury House, and gave it the air of old aristocracy.

But our principal cared not for this; anything more recent than the ancientry of Rome in no wise appealing to his bump of veneration. So he had a semi-circular board planted high over all, stretching from pillar to pillar, and fastened with iron posts to the tops of the globes and secured by a criss-cross of rods to the adjacent walls and copings; and behold! the vivid red and garish blue swaggered forth again in their arrogant smartness, and the mighty words, 'Waltonbury House Academy—Principal, Frederick Horatio Fledger,' with all the rest of it, glared you in the eyes with an insolent pertinacity, which you could neither escape nor find means to resent.

But how did the staid burgesses of Waltonbury regard

these giant strides of enterprise?

Well, they took it in a characteristic way. If it had been heresy or anarchy they would have known how to deal with the offender. But this was a kind of enormity which dazed them at the outset. Still, the more they stared at it the more scandalous it looked, the more to their eyes did it challenge an assault; yet they felt they were unprovided with weapons for so exceptional a contest. Therefore, they did nothing; stood and gazed a good deal at the flaring beacons, gasped and shuddered, and patiently endured it.

It was dawning upon them that there were things and persons too, in this world 'not dreamt of in their

philosophy.'

And yet if I were giving you a history of Waltonbury, I might go on to tell how, in after years, the virus of that bad example began to give evidence of its insidious workings. How, at first, a few of the more venturesome tradesmen erected great signboards over their shops, or made brilliant displays upon their house-fronts, in hopes of securing a lion's share of the public patronage; and how the other shopkeepers, protesting the while, followed suit, one after another, according to their different abilities, in the effort to keep pace with this new departure; and how, as a result, the poor old town was eventually given over to a multitude of signs and wonders, until the quiet spirit of the ancient burgh seemed to fade away. Kindly modera-

tion and neighbourly forbearance were cast aside by the hungering exigencies of the new régime. Hitherto, the guiding motto had been to 'live and let live,' but now the tacit maxim was 'Each one for himself and God for us all,' with this cheery addendum by way of a clincher, 'May the devil take the hindmost.' . . .

But let us enter the portals of our academy, and take note of things and conditions in the interior, premising, of course, that the hideous defacements of the outside had their counterparts in the absurdities and vandalisms within.

The hall was spacious and handsome, but the black and white marble slabs which composed its worn and uneven floor, and had doubtless oft resounded to the stately tread of the cavalier and the pattering footsteps of his high-heeled lady, was three parts covered with a cheap and loud floorcloth of a frantic pattern. A gown and 'mortar-board'—I needn't say whose—very prevalently hung upon the spreading antlers affixed to the wall, the vanity of the parvenu thus overtopping the self-esteem of some former master, of whose prowess in venery they might once have been the cherished token. A pinched and lively carpet cantered up the broad oaken stairs, and the carved posts and balusters of the staircase, erstwhile of a colour deeply rich, had actually been grained 'mahogany' and varnished!

Thus was tinsel laid out upon fine gold at every turn about the house.

The grand old dining-room had been transmogrified into a trashy parlour; and here, above the massive wainscotting breast-high, which was defaced with a coat of salmoncolour, a brilliant London wall-paper tossed its dancing roses up to the panelled ceiling. A ridiculous, flat, little brass fender squatted like a turtle in front of the great fire-dogs on the ample hearth, and an ill assortment of new and puny furniture was posted at all angles about the floor; whilst a swarm of feminine gewgaws,—tricksy ribbons, antimacassars and crotchet work, disported themselves upon the huge and stately mantelpiece, were tacked on to impossible places, sprawled on chair-backs and depended from every corner. A square and bulky case of stuffed birds, balanced upon a spindle-legged table, occupied the centre of

the broad bay-window, and shook like a jelly if you touched it. Wax flowers under globes, and hideous trophies in feathers and coloured grasses, confronted you everywhere and lurked in all the corners, while a blood-red carpet, flaunting and flowery, outraged everything else in the room, which seemed to wear an appealing look of pale disgust.

It was a veritable chamber of horrors, with two exceptions, and these were a pair of handsome globes, which were crowded into the bay-window, one on each side of the case of stuffed birds, poised upon that fragile table, whereon 'hangs a tale,' which in due course shall be'

unfolded to you.

At the back of the house a 'young gentlemen's refectory' had been concocted out of several adjacent chambers on the ground floor, whose partitions had been knocked away, and as the floors and ceilings of these rooms were of various levels and altitudes, and the ornamentations of each, of a different style, you may be sure that the tout ensemble of that gentlemanly refectory was charming in the extreme; and its elegance was enhanced by the rows of trestle tables and rough deal forms, which, as they spread over the apartment, dipped and mounted in sympathy with the unlevel floor, perched up in one place near to the ceiling, and buried at another in the depths below, while several baby step-ladders, provided by the considerate master to somewhat alleviate the ups and downs of locomotion in this exquisite feeding-hall, were usually to be seen shoved over or kicked aside by the saltatory juveniles, who resented these hindrances to their rough-and-tumble proclivities; and I can tell you that the rush of those 'young gentlemen' into the 'refectory' at meal-times had all the verve and effusion of a hurdle race at a country fair—the lower form boys coming down from the higher levels with the thunderous impact of a thousand of bricks, in their scramble for the seats below.

On the infirm and venerable floor, which was all humps and jumps, neither form nor table would consent to stand level or still, while under the stress of multiplied knives and forks, and the contentious pranks of multitudinous, rollicking feet.

Sometimes a boy's plate would be emptied on to his

knees. There was 'many a slip between the cup and the lip'—the cup's contents being sometimes tilted down the scholar's sleeve, while his modicum of bread might be elbowed off the table into the crush underneath it, there to be ground into crumbs in a few seconds. It was enough to give lockjaw to anyone but a schoolboy—to feed in such a place.

So much for the 'refectory' at Waltonbury House

Academy, now for a peep at the 'dormitories.'

These were, of course, upstairs. Very much indeed upstairs were they, consisting, as they did, of the garrets and cock-lofts of the old mansion.

But if you should suppose that the way to those 'dormitories' was up the broad, oaken staircase, over the attenuated but consequential stair-carpet, you would make a vast mistake.

Nothing of the kind, I assure you, for that ascent was altogether sacred to the fairy footsteps of the *materfamilias*, her sister and the 'dear children.' Even Mr Fledger himself was commanded very frequently 'not to go up that way,' because his 'feet' were 'always mucky, trampling about the yard and the schoolroom.'

So the pupils went round by the kitchen door, and climbed a dark and dirty back staircase, up to the landing upon the first floor. Now here, across the hall-way, another flight of stairs led to the attics, but such a route would have necessitated the daily tramping of a hundred mercurial feet across a glowing expanse of Mrs Fledger's carpet, brilliant and fresh as a flower-garden—a perfectly unthinkable proceeding. So these notable expedients were devised—a doorway was punched through the wall at the top of the back-stairs; a little wooden landing, in the shape of a bracket, was fixed up outside of it, and a narrow, external stairway, as steep as a ladder, and covered in from the weather with some rough match-boarding, mounted shakily to the roof above, where it was somehow muddled up with a dormer-window that was made to do duty as a door, thus giving the boys final admission to their sleepingchambers beyond.

I won't hint that this was anything but a most elegant, convenient and academical arrangement, whether viewed from the outside or exploited from within, and I'm sure

that nothing but the genius of a country carpenter, impelled by the iron will of Mistress Fledger, could have been adequate for the manner of its construction. Moreover, as a means to an end—that of 'keeping the brats out of the house,' as the gentle lady tersely expressed it—it was certainly a success, and verified the adage that 'all things are possible to the brave.'

The 'dormitories,' to quote Mrs Fledger again, 'were cosy and clean,' if scarcely satisfactory in other respects. Every foot of space under the roof had been utilised, and as the hips and angles of that roof were numerous and picturesque, as seen from the outside, so their inner surfaces and supports were correspondingly bewildering and inopportune, sloping down in some places within an inch of one's head, at others, soaring many feet above, while heavy beams and braces stood in the way at every turn.

The entire loft was divided up by wooden partitions into a series of cubby-holes of various shapes—'snuggeries' Mrs Fledger called them. These partitions had been covered with a cheese-coloured paper which, refusing to stick to the rough woodwork, was dangling down at the corners. The old roof had been as thoroughly white-washed inside as it had been without. The oak-plank floor was loose and billowy. Texts of scripture and quotations from 'Watts's Divine Songs for Children,' all engrossed in beautiful curlycue by the facile pen of the master, were nailed up on posts and rafters, and clothes-pegs and wash-stands abounded on every hand.

The whole concern had more the appearance of a large stable than a 'young gentlemen's dormitory,' and one looked around for feeding-racks and water-troughs rather than bedsteads and bedding, horse harness and wash-pails instead of the small clothes of the schoolboys. To each 'snuggery' was apportioned a strip of second-hand carpet and a lilliputian looking-glass; but the bedsteads were the cappers to everything, giving plain evidence of Mrs Fledger's thrifty and shifty hand.

She must have rummaged in every old junk-shop she could find, to have gathered such a jumblement, for, saving that they were old, cheap, broken and nasty, they were alike in nothing.

There were truckle bedsteads that opened underneath,

and trussel bedsteads which folded up, and camp bedsteads with neither footboard nor headpiece; square 'four-posters,' roughly shorn of their upper glories, and 'half-testers' with the tops wanting; amplified cribs and extended cots; bedsteads with the backs gone; ditto, with the fronts gone; ditto and ditto, with some or all of the legs gone, and propped up to regulation height upon old boxes, and made to pass muster with a chintz furbelow round their bottoms.

There were bedsteads of bamboo, gas-pipe and lattice-work, and there was one little beauty in particular, fashioned like a boat, that swung between suspending posts, in the manner of a hammock, and devised, I presume, by some lunatic sailor, that he might fancy himself at sea therein. But, mercy on us! how that stupid old bedstead did swing—sometimes.

You never saw such a collection, for style and variety. It had been picked up in different out-of-the-way places, pounced upon at distress-warrant sales, groped after in the rubbish at many a furniture brokers, secured from fag-ends of small auctions on rainy days, when no one was present to bid against her; snatched off for nothing, once or twice, at a fire; rescued from muck-heaps in the cellars of houses being pulled down, and achieved in various other ways, which only a woman of Mrs Fledger's character and calibre would have the instinct to conceive, or the barefaced pertinacity to put into practice.

The bedding was poor, though clean and uniform, having been supplied 'at a very low figure' by Clipfarthing, Yardley & Company, of Waltonbury; and, after all, the bedsteads served their purpose, nay, more, they often served a double purpose, for the 'young gentlemen,' having slept upon them during the night, would awake in the morning with an itch for mischief, and you can fancy the fun they had together with those crippled and crazy bedsteads, and how the old things creaked and groaned, flopped over or doubled up, under the furious treatment they were then subjected to.

But the boat bedstead was the great temptation, not to sleep upon, but to fool with; for half a dozen young imps would quietly creep round it in the small hours of the morning and administer to its slumbering little occupant such a rocking lullaby, that he found himself torn from the arms of Morpheus, and trying, might and main, to leap out of the old trap, only to be shoved back again, however, by the leader of the gang.

This exquisite diversion would be maintained at full swing, until the victim was in a shrieking passion, and the muffled step of a teacher was detected coming up the stairs, when, presto! those mischievous pucks would scuttle off to their beds and be fast asleep and snoring in less than a minute, an angel-smile upon each of their dear young faces. . . .

The schoolrooms at Waltonbury House had at first consisted of several long, low apartments on the ground floor, which had been the servants' quarters in former days, they were badly lighted, and not over nine feet in height.

They had served for a schoolroom so long as the pupils were comparatively few; but when the academy developed into a full-blown day and boarding-school, which it rapidly did, owing to the master's persistent trumpeting, and 'young gentlemen' were sent to it from a distance, as well as from the town and its suburbs, those old rooms proved quite too exiguous, and especially so for Mr Fledger's own requirements, the ceiling being too low to permit of his uplifting himself sufficiently above the heads of his scholars—a defect which he had felt most severely—his sonorous harangues not having their proper effect when delivered within a few inches of the ceiling, although he had done his very best, with sweep of arm and swing of tongue, to manifest his By reason of these disabilities, our principal mastership. had two large rooms erected at the bottom of the kitchen garden, behind the house, opening into each other, with great, sliding doors. They were boxy, flat-roofed, bald and hideous, yet they gave him the desired opportunity of sounding his trumpet and pluming his pinions, and assured his boys the advantages of better light and ventilation, with a corresponding drawback of being very cold in the winter, notwithstanding the stoves.

The ground between the new schoolrooms and the house was 'nicely gravelled,' that is to say, several waggon-loads of pebbles and silt from a neighbouring river-bed were roughly shovelled over it. Gymnastic poles and vaulting-horses were planted in its midst, and what had so lately been the cosy kitchen-garden, became the ramping-ground of a couple of hundred young Britons, lithe and bold, whereon a variety of

roystering games were enacted, and many a chance uproariously contested at 'Hunt the Stag' and 'Chevy Chase.'

Now, when the new rooms were built, a covered way was extended to them from the old ones, which thereafter were utilised as class-rooms for such advanced studies as physiology, phrenology, anatomy, drawing and landscape painting, illuminated writing—anything, in short, which required such an elevated state of mind in the pupils practising it that it was 'imperative' they should be withdrawn from the dust and bustle, the shoutings and dronings of the big schoolroom; and upon occasion, when fond, inquiring parents from afar visited the academy to consult with its principal as to the admission of their sons to the Waltonbury fold, these students in the old class-rooms were specially paraded as examples of extreme scholarly attainment in that noble institution.

Our transcendent Fledger would lead his visitors through these rooms with a superb pomposity of speech and manner that was irresistible, especially to the dear mammas; and I should inform you, sub rosa, that a green shade was judiciously disposed sometimes over the brow of a pupil, here and there, as he bent to his studies. Folding screens were posed about the floors to modify the light for several little groups of 'art students,' who could be seen behind them, profoundly engaged in silent endeavour. An imposing array of drawings, diagrams, plaster-casts, rolls of drawing paper, colour-boxes, mathemathical instruments, etc., etc., was strewn about the rooms. A microscope stood upon a central table, with a moderator-lamp attachment, and a skeleton, perched upon a baize-enfolded platform, grinned hideously out of its gloom in one of the corners. You will easily comprehend how all this elegant humbug and choice legerdemain helped to make the show a complete success, when touched off by the masterly hand of Frederick Horatio.

The 'young gentlemen' enjoyed these shoddy performances; they liked being looked upon by their gullible visitors as scientists and artists, in ovo, and they willingly took their cue when the master, whose resounding strides and high-strung conversation gave them prudential notice of his approach, flung open the door and addressed them in his blandest, yet most important manner, in terms like these,—

'Young gentlemen, Mr or Mrs, or Mr and Mrs So and So does us the favour of a visit of inspection for—er—the purpose of observing the character of our studies. We will, therefore, pass quietly round amongst you, endeavouring not to disturb anyone more than is absolutely unavoidable.' Then, turning to the visitor or visitors with a gracious sweep of the hand, he would thus proceed: 'My dear sir' (or madam), 'will you be pleased to step this way? must apologise for the apparatus and material lying about, but our young men are making use of them, more or less, all the time, so you will excuse the apparent disorder'; and those invited ones would follow meekly in Mr Fledger's important, creaking footsteps, or pursuing, it might be, a more independent course, would sidle around sprawling easels, catch their clothes on the corners of drawing-boards, overturn a colour-box here and there, or tread upon a packet of pencils or a pair of compasses, smiling and purring and rolling their eyes the while in dazzled wonder or fawning adulation, putting a few tame questions to the boys about the mysteries of their work, or bestowing a trite encomium, where it was least deserved, upon some meteoric pageant of 'illuminated writing,' or a water-colour landscape as brilliant as a rainbow.

It was an exquisite piece of acting all round, and would have moistened your eyes in lively sympathy had you beheld it. It must be admitted, however, that some of the 'young gentlemen' had to pinch each other under the desks, pretty severely, to preserve a fitting decorum until the play was over; and when that party filed out again, and Mr Fledger's melliflous voice could be heard in the distance gilding everything he discoursed upon with the glamour of his magnificent pretences, you may be certain those exemplary scholars had 'a high old time' of it, to make up for their recent restraints—bombardments of india-rubbers and ink-erasers all round; elbows sharply jerked in practical discouragement of the efforts of a few painstaking, tonguetwisting scholars, here and there, with brush and pen; pans of water-colours emptied down one another's backs; mahlsticks, pencils, brushes and crayons hurled in wild trajectories across the rooms, with a variety of other gentle and amiable pranks, which come as natural to a pack of schoolboys as the eating of their dinners.

I have finished with the generalties of Waltonbury's famous academy. I have framed you a basis for its fortunes and those of its founder, who has yet to elaborate them; and, having due regard for its possibilities, I have enlarged its peripheries in describing its bounds, not forgetting that our noble institution, in all its glory, may be likened to a beacon-tower set upon a hill,—being at once a signal-house and sensorium of learning, our stately principal, himself its transplendent blaze, held in a classic brazier.

It behoves me, however, ere proceeding in the direct course of my narrative, to make you acquainted with the guiding spirits of the master's home, with others more subordinate, unfolding to you the plexus of the Fledger organism, showing you the principient powers behind the throne, the *imperium in imperio*, according to the master's phraseology, seeing that those inner forces must largely mould the coming history. To this purpose, then, I devote another chapter.

CHAPTER VI

THE MACHINERY-TWIN SCREWS

FIRST and foremost in the Fledger household was its sovereign lady, Mrs Celestia Fledger, and an unmarried sister, Miss Angeletta Crunch, was her very sufficient second and co-adjutress. Next in order came an unruly swarm of fledglets, who were variously inept from an 'academical' standpoint.

With the exception of the eldest, who was a lusus natura, and counted for nothing, they were a headstrong, restless and ubiquitous brood, who, with their mamma and their 'Aunty Crunch,' constituted the vital portion of the household, our honoured principal proudly bringing up the rear as an after-guard to the domestic chariot.

Courage! Horatio, our master, and console yourself

with these reflections: that the glories of your family are reflected in you; that you are its pivot, and its counterpoise; that your rôle of subordinate is alike indispensable and unavoidable; and, finally and especially, that 'he who is down need fear no fall.'

Now for the servants, a body which always plays an important part in the economy of an establishment like this.

The number of these people was not remarkable when we consider the work they were expected to do.

There was a housemaid and a parlourmaid, and a nursemaid for those little fledglets not out of the straw; these were our lady's particular servants, and there was a maid-of-all-work besides, who was everybody's servant. They were all country girls, buxom and ruddy. And there was a portly and portentous cook, 'who filled her place and knew it,' Mollie Buttox by name; and a gardener, Mr Grafton Budd, who had seen better days, and who was also a sort of general factotum, running errands and cleaning the boots and shoes, both the errands and the shoes being extremely numerous. He also made the beds in the 'dormitory,' scooped up the dirty linen and doled out the clean, laid the rough-and-ready tables in the 'refectory,' and occasionally scrubbed the floors and cleaned the windows; and was, besides, held in requisition for every kind of tinkering about the house, setting the mouse-traps, fidgeting on a high pair of steps with the curtain-poles, cob-webs and candelabra, repairing locks and window fastenings, and swilling the kitchen sink; and by reason of these, his multivarious activities, had little of the gardener about him, excepting the name. Yet, I doubt not, this was something of a satisfaction to the poor man, for I must remind you that 'a gentleman's gardener' is usually a person of admitted capability, manifest authority and leisurely occupation, and is, therefore, in his own particular sphere, exclusive and didactic by privilege.

A household like this pretended to be, always feels better by the adjunct of a gardener, and, I needn't say, the Fledger family nurtured this feeling too, and yielded their man the husks of the honour while refusing him the kernel. So it was continually, 'Where's the gardener?'

'Call the gardener'; 'Tell the gardener I wish to speak to him.' It rolled off their tongues with a generous flow; it was easy and it was cheap, and consoled that functionary considerably in the course of his versatile and unenviable duties, helping him to preserve a semblance, at least, of the trim self-respect of his halcyon days, sprinkling as it were with a deft thumb and finger, his inner man with a moral salt (he had been a real 'gentleman's gardener' had Mr Grafton Budd), impelling him thereby to patch his old breeches, seats and knees, sew on his shirt-buttons, and otherwise keep his decayed old self decent and clean.

Whereas, if our great people, with a nicer regard for the mischievous truth, had shouted about the house—'Where's the grubber?' 'Call our muck-amuck'; 'Tell the scrub I want him,' our poor worthy might have lost all interest in himself, and probably would have gone about the place a disgrace to everybody, a contingency too horrible to be dwelt upon, remembering how very respectable they were at Waltonbury House.

Finally, as a finish to our establishment, a 'buttons' was mindfully included, a youth whose ministrations were as various and adaptable as Mr Budd's; in fact he was another multum in parvo of a lower grade. He was never called any other name but Bob, but it was a good enough name for him.

A tight little black jacket, embellished with a row of brass buttons, depended from a nail down in the kitchen, and a dirty comb, at the end of a dirtier string, dangled by its side, and our 'buttons' was required to whip on that jacket and to whisk that comb through his tow-coloured hair like a flash of lightning, the moment a double knock was heard at the door, or a resounding ring of the bell betokened the arrival of visitors; and, furthermore, he was expected to disentangle himself instantly from all other engagements, and rush off to his janitorial duties in the hall. Besides this, he was directed in a general way to help the gardener, and was used as a kind of muckender at everybody's hand, doing anything that was too menial, mean or dirty for anyone else to do; and meanly enough he did it, telling awkward lies at Mrs Fledger's behest to the duns and tradespeople at the back door; breaking the tiles with his boots while clambering over the roof to sweep the kitchenchimney; messing with the pots and pans in the scullery, and smearing the boys' plates and dishes about by way of washing them; emptying, replenishing and cat-licking the crockery-ware up in the 'dormitory' and leaving a trail of unwholesome wetness behind him throughout the 'snuggeries' as an aftermath to these operations; and sometimes getting rough-and-ready thanks for the same in the shape of an old shoe viciously flung at his head, or by assault of his hinder parts with vengeful, hurtling carpet-bag. He was a 'white hen's chick' was Bobby.

Besides these various helpers, two or three gentlemen ushers usually boarded at Waltonbury House, one of them, at least, always sleeping under its venerable roof. These scholastic waifs were a shifting and variable quantity, usually subservient and sad, for they were expected to endure smilingly and patiently, the jibes and practical jokes of the mercurial fledglets—ear-puliing, hat-hiding, boobytraps, and all the rest of it, and sometimes to clean Mrs Fledger's shoes, or her sister's, when the menials of the place were too busy to do it. But should those ushers refuse to accord these amenities, or insist upon their natural privileges as gentlemen, their services were sure to be dispensed with, and they were compelled to vacate in favour of 'nicer young men.'

Now, the gardener ruled the 'buttons' and unmercifully 'fagged' him, while, to make things equitable, he himself had to scamper to everyone's call. And the cook, in her turn, very much ruled the maids, the gardener, the 'buttons,' and the numerous unnecessary cats, and even the mastiff, Cæsar, in his barrel at the washhouse door. Yes, she ruled and roasted and flouted them all, did Mollie Buttox, sometimes by turns and at others altogether, according to the degree of temper in which she found herself.

A state of things like this naturally gave rise sometimes to a noisy little rebellion in the kitchen, which was endured in moderation by the higher powers, as a kind of servants' safety valve for the pressure of their own exactions; but, should the turbult become too uproarious, a distant door would open and a ponderous footstep would come tramping towards the servants' quarters. Then straightway 'a shadow and a fear' would steal over the faces of the

contestants, 'a sense of mastery their spirits daunted,' for a thunderous voice from the corridor would premonish them of coming evil, and the next moment the supreme lady of the house, with her sister in the background, would sail into the kitchen, stilling the tumult by her tremendous presence, boxing the ears of the Susans and the Mary-Janes, visiting Mr Grafton Budd himself sometimes, with a back-hander in the face, hurling the unfortunate 'buttons' into a corner, and shaking an irate forefinger in Mollie Buttox's red visage, would threaten her with instant dismissal and the forfeit of a month's wages.

But Mrs Fledger's conflicts and victories were by no means confined to the purlieus of her kitchen. In her bedroom, in her dining-room, in her very own parlour, up and down her proprietary staircase, and in that drawing-room so particularly hers, Celestia's dictum gave the ne plus ultra to all contentions, and set a terminable point to every argument. Her sway was autocratic and complete. This governance gave her no pains with her complaisant sister, who was a deputy of hers, nor excepting upon occasion, with her wayward cubs; because, although they were as headstrong as a swarm of peccaries, they knew their mamma's arm was as ready to swing as her tongue was to wag, and that prompt and overwhelming physical force was ready to deal out penalties in every encounter.

No, no, the bitter strife, the foil and counter-foil were maintained entirely with her lord and master, and her final conquering prowess was measured out upon him.

However, our great man was very insensible to his own defeats; or, if momentarily constrained to accept them, they were soon obscured and forgotten in the ever-present halo of his unquenchable egoism. For he was a cock that would always be a-crowing and flapping his wings, who loved before everything—the dear sound of his own voice, and would be all fuss and feathers even while beating an ignominious retreat. Fond of snatching a victory whenever he could, Mr Fledger was yet no sort of match for his superior half when it came to a pitched battle. He might storm and rave, beat the air and thump the table, and strike all manner of heroic attitudes, but they availed him nothing, excepting in the way of a little exercise, for

his sovereign lady would easily out-do him in these pranks, and would finally put the stopper on him by mouthing him down. She was fighting with the set purpose of grasping the management of everything and establishing her own prerogative, and she kept a steady eye upon the spoils and gathered them all in when the conflict was over

Year in and year out, and ceaselessly, day by day, she had widened the bounds of her jurisdiction. No advantage gained was ever relinquished, no ground once occupied ever surrendered, until the principal's domiciliary pretensions were narrowed down in the smallest possible compass, and he floundered around in the old demesne, hampered and hindered, and writhing under a conscious ban and continual interdiction, yet fuming and protesting all the while, exasperated beyond measure by the cruel fact that all his scientific hobbies, his pet diversions, and even the daily round of his scholastic labours, were quite within the clapper-claw reach of his fell domestic griffin.

Here is a sample of the kind of thing that frequently

occurred at Waltonbury House.

One day the master was making great preparations for a lecture he was to deliver in the evening to his scholars and their friends upon 'Oxygen gas and its properties,' and, being rather pressed for time in the preliminaries, had brought a lot of apparatus into the dining-room just before dinner, and, spreading it out on the mantel-shelf, which he had hastily dismantled for the occasion, started up the process of making some oxygen with a retort, tripod-stand, spirit-lamp and the rest of it, his purpose being to take a 'snack' of dinner while at work at his chemical processes.

Mrs Fledger had been out all the morning, and getting home rather later than pleased her, repaired to the diningroom to see if the dinner-table had been laid. The table's condition was found satisfactory, but when she set eyes upon her spouse, engrossed with his scientific pursuits, and wearing a long, dirty apron—just upon dinner time—beheld the array of apparatus upon her befringed and betasseled mantelpiece, gazed upon the vases, the ornaments, the artificial flowers and ormolu clock—all huddled together upon the sofa, with her father's and mother's photographs

tossed upside down upon the heap; why, she fairly gasped and gulped with indignation, and, drawing a long, terrible breath, exploded and thundered like this: 'Whell, upon my soul, you're a pretty beauty. How dare you bring your nasty rattletraps into my dining-room? upsetting everything, too, just as we're going to have dinner? Haven't we quarrelled enough over this kind of thing before? Out with it at once now, before I knock it all off the shelf for you. Go and take it to your own glory-hole, and let me tell you, once for all, you sha'n't bring your muck into my place.'

'Upon my word, Mrs Fledger,' replied the principal, facing round to the lady, with his chin up in the air, 'you really do assume a great deal too much, and you are very insulting besides. I must insist upon the right to do as

I please in my own house.'

'Yes,' replied the irate Celestia, with a fine scorn; 'yes, indeed, your own house, and a pretty house it would soon be, wouldn't it, if I should let you have your own way in it? Why, it wouldn't be fit for any respectable person to come into. Clear out, I say, and take your rubbish along with you, before it explodes or something all over my carpet. Sooky is going to set the dinner, and I want you out of the way.'

'Woman,' replied the master, white with rage, and brandishing a long piece of glass-tubing in his hand, in lieu of the customary cane, 'listen to me. When I married you, I never intended to let you crow over me like this, and

I am resolved, come what will-'

'No, I daresay not,' broke in the termagant, 'we know what you men are; and now let me tell your, sir, when I married you, and it's a pity I ever did, I was determined to stand none of your nonsense, and always to be mistress in my own house, like my poor mother before me; but then she had a man to deal with, a man who knew his place and kept it. Why, bless my heart alive, if my father had treated my mother as you treat me, there would have been hell upon earth in the place, that's what; and mind you, I'm going to take a leaf out of her book; it's time I did, when you will keep bringing your nasty, dangerous muck into my dining-room. Come, out with you, rubbish and all, for I can't stand prating to you any longer. Letty and the children want their dinner, poor things, and you

know it, though it's little enough you care about that. I don't call you a man.'

'It matters not what you call me, madam,' replied the master, bringing his fist down on the table with a crash that made the dinner things dance, 'for I don't regard you as a woman; you are a vile creature, and you make my home unbearable. I must have been a fool, indeed, when I married you!'

'What, sir! Will you dare to talk like that to me?' screamed the virago. 'To me! your true and lawful wife, and the mother of your children; for shame, sir. Out you go this minute,' snatching at the glass rod that was dancing about near her face, in Fledger's hand, and snapping it all to pieces.

But just then Susan entered with a hot roast, and Horatio, glad of an opportunity for a truce, gathered up his apparatus and withdrew with it into a little vestibule which opened into the dining-room, trusting he would be unmolested. He was mistaken, for under this arrangement Mrs Fledger at once perceived that she could not regard her victory as complete. To permit this move would be too much of a compromise. No; she had told him to take his things into his own glory-hole, and down they should go. So he had barely landed his paraphernalia upon an old trunk that stood in the corner, when his inveterate antagonist tackled him again.

'Now, what are you taking your rubbish in there for? So you're determined to have your own way, are you? Take all those things into your own quarters, I tell you, this minute.'

Our great man affected to treat his spouse with silent contempt, although her continued abuse was almost too much for him, and a lovely pink spot appeared upon each of his waxen cheeks. But Mrs Fledger was not to be baulked of her conquest in this manner, so she caught up the retort which, being very hot, she dropped again on to the floor, smashing it to pieces, while the fuming manganese was scattered about her feet. Then she knocked over the tripod-stand and blew out the spirit-lamp, and gathering up the jars in a cluster, made a dash along the rear passage to the 'laboratory,' with the master at her heels, dodging first to the one side and then to the other, in a desperate effort to get hold of his traps, and choking and bursting with a

swarm of expletives so non-academic and outrageous that I must refuse to give them a place in a history like this; suffice it to say that, when the contestants reached the 'glory-hole,' which they did in high old rough-and-tumble fashion, there ensued a scrambling and a scuttling, a smashing and a screaming, with lots of swear words inter-

mingled, that was truly disgraceful.

Then Mrs Fledger withdrew, snorting and triumphant, the 'laboratory' door was slammed and locked behind her, and 'Etty and the children, poor things,' together with our gentle Celestia, took a plentiful mid-day meal, but no one saw anything more of the master until the next morning, excepting Bobby, who took him a cold chop and some tea and bread and butter when it was growing dusk, and swept up a lot of broken glass which he bore away in an old coal-scuttle, along with a written message to one of the ushers.

Soon afterwards a notice was nailed up on the street-door of the schoolroom explaining that the lecture upon 'Oxygen and its Properties' had been unavoidedly post-poned.

But I will give you another sample.

When Mr Fledger came up to dinner one morning from his duties in the schoolroom, he found no one to welcome him at the table but his numerous noisy fledglets and the rosy-cheeked, red-armed Susan, who was flitting about the chair-backs.

'Pull your sleeves down, Sooky,' shouted a saucy and writhing fledglet, when they were all seated. 'Mar wouldn't let you wait at our dinner-table in your bare arms if she was down here. Look, par! Sooky's got her sleeves turned up.'

And the Susan, thus admonished, flushed crimson to the roots of her hair, and chafed down her tight and wrinkled sleeves to a little below her elbows, which was as far as she could get them, poor thing, casting, as she did so, a not very amiable glance at the little reptile who had taken her to task.

The master smiled grimly at the budding proclivities of his young gallinipper, and, turning to the servant, asked her where her mistress was.

'If you please, sir,' replied Sooky, 'missus is upstairs lying

down with a splitting 'eadache, and Miss Letty is upstairs a-settin' with her, and she told me to say they're not comin' down to dinner, and for me to take her dinner up to her; and missus, she don't want nothin', and to tell you to get your dinner the best way you can, and see that the children have all they want and not drop their victuals on the carpet.'

'Very well,' said the master gravely, 'that will do, Sooky,

take this meat cover, please.'

And without further talk the stomach-loading business was started on every hand, our principal's elbows swinging valiantly in his assaults upon the roast beef. Plates clattered and were passed up, loaded with comestibles and handed down amongst those omnivorous youngsters who, like a living fringe, skirted the table round, roystering, wriggling and rough, while poor Nemo Sheepshead, who had just come in, afforded a sharp contrast to all the rest, meekly awaited his portion, which was last and least.

Knives, forks and spoons merrily jingled as our select company shovelled the provender into their mouths, gobbling and slubbering, one against the other, with steady voracity, until none could eat any more; then the chairs were pushed back or upset, bibs and napkins, crumpled and foul, were flung upon the table or dropped on the floor, and it was all over. And they were all very hot, and mouths needed wiping, and fingers were foul and greasy, and tempers were sore and inflamed. And the roar and tumult of the boys in the 'refectory' as they too jumped up from their dinners could be heard from down below.

The master had left the dining-room. He had done his full share in the gastronomic orgy, and now felt that he was fortified for an enterprise, in which he had long sought an

opportunity to embark.

Mrs Fledger was indisposed, confined to her room, and her sister was with her. She was probably suffering from a bilious attack, thought our crafty Horatio. She had been this way before, after partaking too continuously of her lavounte breakfast dish to wit, a refection of suet and mansage meat boiled in cream and smothered with cayenne papper; and he knew by experience that she would fail to be her dear energetic self until the fires of her late ragout had burned themselves out, probably not until the next



And her sister Letty was with her. This was fortunate, and showed that Celestia was having quite a bad spell. It was plain, reasoned our master, that the reins of government would be relaxed for a few hours, and that altogether, the Fates were propitious, and there would be a chance for him to show his own individual hand in a matter which he conceived had long needed it. So, instead of going upstairs to learn for himself the particulars of his lady's ailment, and to see if he might render her some delicate attention in keeping with the strong mutual affection which subsisted between them-I say, instead of doing this, he hied him straightway to the kitchen and routed out the gardener, who, having also just concluded his mid-day repast, was, like his master, about to try a hazardous business upon the strength of it, and was whetting his wits in an encounter with Mistress Buttox, who had been laying down the law to him at the end of a rollingpin.

'Mr Budd,' said our great man, 'leave off wrangling with Mrs Buttox and come with me to the front garden immediately, and bring your gardening tools with you; I think I can find something for you to do better than coddling in the kitchen and quarrelling with the cook.'

'Certainly, sir,' replied the old gaffer, with a great show of alacrity. 'There's plenty as wants doin' in the front garden, sir, but somehows I can never find time to do it. Your good lady is always a-wantin' me so much indoors, you know, sir,' added he, by way of further explanation.

'Well, come along,' said the master; and he proceeded at once to the front of the house, while Budd trotted behind him with a wheelbarrow full of horticultural weapons.

Arrived upon the spot, our Horatio proceeded to point out to his ancient retainer, with many a declamatory flourish, the disgraceful and weedy condition of the paths and flower-beds there, and directed him to put the garden in nice order in the course of the afternoon, 'which you may do quite easily,' added he, 'as you will not be disturbed for the rest of the day. I shall come round here again this evening before you leave off work, to see what sort of a job you've made of it, and I shall expect it to be satisfactory. I am quite ashamed to have my friends come up to the house through such an abominable wilderness.'

'Very good, sir,' replied the old buffer. 'It's a'most too much for 'arf a day's work, sir, but I'll do my best, you may

depend.'

Whereupon the principal, with an anticipatory smile upon his hook-nosed countenance, marched back to his throne in the schoolroom, hugging himself with the thought that at last he was going to have something his own way. In fact, so flattering was the unction which he laid to his soul, and so generous the humour which resulted therefrom, that he remitted the punishment of a whole string of delinquents whom the teachers had sent up to the platform to await correction at his lordly hand. Nay, he afterwards treated the upper boys in class to a charming discourse upon the hanging gardens of Babylon, instead of wracking their brains with the accustomed exercises in mental arithmetic, and made things so pleasant—nay, so perfectly delightful all round with pupils and teachers alike—that every one felt sorry when the long, happy afternoon drew to a close.

It was a veritable Indian summer of felicity, and a reckoning without the hostess, and a calm before the storm. Now, precisely at the moment of our principal's departure

from the front garden, after the delivery of his behests to Grafton Budd, a significant thing might have been seen to

happen.

A curtain was hastily drawn aside from a bedroom window, and a large, unpleasant, inquisitorial face scowled down upon those archaic paths and flower-beds, and upon the bobbing and bending form of the old gardener, absorbed in his unwonted task. It was the face of Angeletta Crunch. She had been drawn away from her sister's bedside by the clangour of the garden-tools as they were dumped out of the barrow by Budd, before commencing operations. It may be that the old fox had adopted that noisy manner of attracting the attention of the ladies upstairs for his own especial purposes, for he always showed a great aversion to a steady job.

Be this as it may, Miss Angeletta looked out of the window, and, taking in the situation at a single glance, returned to her sister's bedside and accosted her thus,—

'I say, Essy, are you asleep? Because there's old Budd

out in front, doing up the garden.'
'What!' snorted Mrs Fledger, who had been in a half-dose; 'doing up the front garden? when he knows I want

him to take down the window-curtains for the summer and sweep the carpet in your bedroom this afternoon. I told him about it with my own lips while he was cleaning these windows. Is the old fool mad, or what's the matter with him? Open the window, Sis, and ask him what he means by it.'

And sister Letty did as she was directed, forthwith.

'If you please, miss,' answered our old worthy, straightening himself up, with the back of his left hand planted across his loins, 'the master he told me to come out here and neaten things up a bit. But, lord, miss, this is too much for an afternoon's work, and I told him so,' looking around wearily at the tangle and disorder.

Mrs Fledger, who was now wide awake, caught this reply through the open window, and, forgetting her sick headache, arose, scrambled to the casement and spoke up at once in

no uncertain tone,-

'What business have you to be mucking about out there, Budd? No matter who told you; you know who's master in this house. Take all those things back into the woodshed instantly, and come upstairs to me; I've got plenty for you to do, and you know it.' And seeing that the old man affected to hesitate, added sharply, 'Be quick, now, and don't put me out while I'm feeling like this, or I'll send you about your business. It's mighty fine, I think, that I can't get any little paltry thing done in the house while you're lazying about there.'

'Oh, all right, mum; only Mr Fledger he said particklar, mum, as he was comin' round 'ere in the evenin' to see what I'd been a-doin', and he'll be dreadful put out with me, mum.'

'Well, never you mind about that. You come straight up here and do as I tell you. I'm not going to argue with the likes of you,' and she drew herself back and slammed the casement.

Well, the gardening was abandoned, and the bed-curtains taken down, brushed and folded away, and the carpet swept in Miss Letty's apartment, that lady herself superintending the whole business with vicegerent zeal.

Meanwhile the shadows lengthened on those neglected lawns and flower-beds, and the

'Birds of the wilderness, Blithesome and cumberless,' nestled in the bosky thickets, and called to each other out of the overgrown, straggling shrubbery of that garden; and the nettles and dandelions went quietly on seeding themselves down, undisturbed by weeding-fork or spade, till dusky evening furtively shrouded all the naughty license of the wayward place, so innocent as it was of the hand of man; and into that garden, with the gloaming, along its paths and over its beds, strode our dumfounded, disappointed, irate Mr Fledger.

The master soon satisfied himself that none of his commands had been obeyed, and he found no traces of Mr Grafton Budd, saving his forgotten spade, which he had left sticking in the sward a few hours before; and, instantly divining the cause of the old gentleman's defection, turned upon his heel and cast a stern, swift glance up at his wife's

bedroom window.

A pair of broad, unpleasant faces happened to be looking down upon him at that very moment, and their insulting gleefulness seemed to stab him like a dagger. Wild with rage, he clenched his fists and threw his arms about in muttered exasperation. The two ladies had disappeared from the window, yet he could distinctly hear the rills of mocking laughter which they carried away with them.

But our great man was not disposed to consume his soul in silence; and, dashing into the house, rushed upstairs to that bedroom. He found the door shut, but he broke

into his wife's presence without ceremony.

'Is this your doing, madam?' shouted he, waving his hand majestically towards the little desert outside. 'I told Budd to clean up that front garden this afternoon, and not to leave it until I saw him in the evening. I went out just now, and was surprised to find everything in statu quo, the work not even commenced, and the old rascal nowhere to be found. Has he dared to disobey me, or is it your doing, madam?'

'Yes, Fledge' (an epithet she often indulged in when she had a mind to be nasty). 'Yes, Fledge,' replied his spouse, who had been reclining upon the bed, but now arose to a sitting posture. 'Don't you blame the old man for it. It mas my doing, and I shall do it again too, whenever it suits the. This is a big house, the summer's coming on, and there's lots of cleaning to do. I wanted the gardener up

here this afternoon, and I had him—that's enough. If you're in such a hurry over your silly old garden, run down town and get some of those fellows to do it, hanging about there with their hands in their pockets. And how dare you come up here to me, sir, in your airs, about that or anything else, to-day? and I that ill, too, I can hardly crawl. You unmanly fellow, you. Be off with you! and don't you ever come bursting into my room again, when you know my sister's here, for she doesn't like it, and I don't blame her. How do you know what we mightn't be doing? Another time, mind, I'll lock the door, for you sha'n't come poking your long, ugly nose in here when you're not wanted.'

'Madam,' shouted Horatio, in a fury, 'I am always hearing a vast deal too much about your room and your place, and your sister and your children, and your everything; and I must have you understand, as I've told you before, that

they are not yours, but mine.'

'Ha, ha, ha-a!' shrieked the two women in chorus.

'Why, you're getting out of your depths, man,' sneered

Angeletta; 'I didn't know that I belonged to you.'

'Furthermore,' he continued, not noticing her interruption, 'there isn't a day in the week that you are not monopolising the services of all the help in the place. I can't get the schoolrooms swept, nor the garden kept in order, nor my boots cleaned, nor even these clothes brushed that I stand up in, nor anything else done, in fact, because, forsooth, the servants are always kept on the full run, dancing attendance upon you and your sister there, and I'm tired of it.'

'Sir,' angrily broke in the fair Angeletta, 'you will leave

me out of your discussion, if you please.'

'I shall do nothing of the kind, madam,' hotly rejoined the master. 'You make yourself a member of my household, and you shall be subject to my criticism. And remember this, Mrs Fledger,' again facing round to his gentle lady, 'if you dare to lock my bedroom door when I wish to come in, I'll burst it open, that's all.'

'Ha, ha, ha, ha, h-a-a!' screamed his tormentors.

'Look here, now,' rejoined the fair Celestia, whose blood was up, 'I may as well tell you the truth at once, and end it. You're not my kind of a man—never was, for the matter of that. You're a self-conceited, self-satisfied, obstinate old

fool. So now you've got it pat, and if I'm to put up with you at all—and I don't say I always will—it's only on condition that I have my own way in this house; yes, my own way, do you hear? and all over the place, come to that, call it yours or call it mine. And if you dare to break open any door that I lock, upstairs or down, bedroom, dining-room or parlour, I'll have you taken up for a madman, as true as. I stand here.'

'Will you, indeed, madam?' We'll see about that, roared

the master, shaking his fist in his spouse's face.

'Yes, that will I,' pursued the mistress. 'And look at his dirty boots, straight up out of that filthy garden on to my carpets. Sis, you're stronger than I am' (she must have been strong indeed); 'Sis, let's put him out, and lock him out.'

Whereupon there followed a most outrageous tussle. Our Horatio, though strong in the arms and shoulders, was as I told you at the beginning, rather weak in the legs, and soon found that he was no match for the two infuriated women, who spun him round like a teetotum and shoved him out of the door, which they instantly locked.

Our great man now lost all control of himself. foamed and raged, and thumped at the door, clamouring for readmission, conducting himself, I am afraid, like a low blackguard: but it was all to no purpose; those gentle sisters within only laughed at him by way of reply; and stung beyond endurance by their repeated taunts, he took one step backwards, tightened his knuckles, and delivering straight from the shoulder, he landed a terrific blow upon the door-panel, shattering it to splinters, driving his arm completely through and tearing the skin in strips from the back of his hand. The two women inside were astonished and alarmed, but quickly mastering their trepidation, resolved to win the fight at all hazards. There was a hasty consultation, and then 'sister Letty' rushed to the window, flung it open, and screamed out at the top of her voice, 'Bobby, I say, Bobby! Tell the gardener to run down town to the police-station and fetch a constable; here's your master gone stark, staring mad!'

But no 'Bobby' was visible, nor, as it seemed, within earshot, nor any of the other servants; indeed, the stillness

round the house was quite phenomenal, and 'sister Letty'

called repeatedly in vain.

But Mr Fledger heard that passionate appeal, if no one else did, and felt that, for all his stubborn gallantry, he was again vanquished, and that it was time for him to beat a hasty retreat. He must get downstairs and stop that sly old devil, the gardener, or anyone else, from running on so diabolical an errand, even if he should have to scamper down the middle of the street, bareheaded and bleeding to do it; for to be reduced to the necessity of explaining matters to the guardians of the peace was a prospect too horrifying for him to think of.

So he quickly withdrew his wounded member from the ruins of the door-panel, and that he might reach the bottom of the house the quicker, bolted across the upper hall and down the dark back stairs, which would take him into the back garden, and thence by a side door, clear out into a little lane which intersected the street. It was a short cut, and would, he hoped, enable him to kidnap the messenger cleverly. So away he went, bounding down that dark staircase, three steps at a time, when—thump! thump! bundle! bump! clatter! shuffle! giggle! titter! slap!

bang! boom!...

'Hell and furies! What's all this?' roared the master, as rolling heels over head at the foot of the staircase, amongst a mass of wriggling and writhing humanity, he picked himself up, rubbed his eyes with his left hand, and glared about him. He had no occasion for any further gallop in quest of Angeletta's messengers. For there lay Bobby with Mrs Buttox on top of him, while Grafton Budd was mingled up under a mass of housemaids, nursemaids, and chambermaids, all striving to escape from their narrow quarters into the kitchen, out of range of the master's eye, who, covered with dust, his nose bleeding, as well as his hand, and his long hair tossed over his eyes, stood panting, gulping and trembling, like a lion at bay. It was a dreadful spectacle, and to think that this desperate, dishonoured and dirty creature was the lordly principal of Waltonbury House Academy!

But what had happened? Why, our great man, in his headlong course had simply tumbled right into the midst of all his servants, falling foul of them in a way he had not

anticipated. Yes, he had come down, like a bombshell among them, scattering them right and left, and yet, only a moment before, these delectables had composed a cosy little cluster of listeners at the foot of those dark backstairs, to the goings on in the regions above, not fore-seeing the catastrophe which had so suddenly overtaken them.

'What are you all doing here?' again shouted the master, but almost before he could get the words out of his mouth they had all bolted down the passage, excepting poor Mollie Buttox, whose exceeding avoirdupois not permitting her to bestir herself in that way, concluded to accept the inevitable and 'brazen it out.' So she squatted down on the bottom stair, wiping her hot face, panting and smoothing her hair, and trying to get her breath for some sort of reply. 'And what are you doing here, Mrs Buttox?' again demanded the master.

'Lawks-a-daisy-me, sir, they've almost killed me between the lot of 'em, those dreadful gals and that young cuss of a boy, and that old beast of a gardener, too, all a listenin', sir, their very 'ardest, while you and the missus was havin' words. And I couldn't bear to see it, so I'd jest stepped out to ask 'em all what business it was of theirs, when down you comes right into the middle of us. Oh, Lord! oh, Lord! I never was so taken a-back in all my life, and I believe they've broke my neck or something, I'm that bruised and stiff I can hardly move,' pulling herself up by the balusters as she spoke.

'Well, well, Mollie,' replied Mr Fledger, somewhat mollified by poor Buttox's distressful condition, and not unmindful that he stood in need of a little nursely assistance, 'I see how it is; we are all in the wrong to-day, and the less said the better; but now I want you to attend to this hand of mine; it pains me confoundedly, and I'm afraid it's badly hurt.'

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'Lawks! sir.' exclaimed the cook as she

'Lawks! sir,' exclaimed the cook, as she stared at the injured member.

'Yes, Mrs Buttox, your mistress angered me very much, just now, as I daresay you know, by locking the bedroom door upon me, and I, well I put my fist through it.'

'Sakes alive, you don't say so? What a day we're havin'. But if you'll please to come into the kitchen, sir,

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I'll wash and bandage that poor hand the best I can. My! but it's badly cut, that it is,' remarked the good woman, as she examined it.

So they repaired to the kitchen, and Mrs Buttox washed and bandaged the injured member and recommended the master to 'keep himself quiet,' and the other servants slunk away like rats into their holes, and Mr Fledger, once more badly beaten, retreated to the laboratory, his harbour of refuge in domestic storms, and bolting the door, passed a supperless evening and a sleepless night, snoozing in his arm-chair until morning. Just as the principal was retiring to his 'glory-hole' a noise was heard from above like the neighing of a horse, and Susan ran to the kitchen door, and told Mrs Buttox that the missus was havin' the hysterics dreadful, and she'd better go up to her at once; so the cook went and ministered to our gentle lady's perturbations, accordingly.

And when the house was quiet, and the mistress had been pacified and put to bed, and the master was heard to bolt himself into his laboratory, those pestiferous servants emerged from their various fastnesses and stole back into the kitchen: and there, around the table, in the gloom of a solitary candle, they ventured to stay their empty stomachs with a 'snack of bread and cheese' and a swig or two of small beer, provided by the cook, in lieu of their accustomed repast, which had been rudely pretermitted in the recent hubbub.

Yes, Mrs Buttox and Bobby, Grafton Budd and Susan and the Mary-Janes,—all that little cluster which had nestled at the foot of the back stairs, drew together, snug and harmonious once again, while they discussed in game-some undertones, far into the small hours, the points and

features of the late melodrama.

Now, when the morning came, an inconvenient reckoning-up time came with it, and the sinister aspect of affairs had to be glozed over somehow. You see the case was this:—

The principal had not only been put hors de combat, but he carried with him the awkward evidence of his defeat. When he turned a summersault over his listening servants, he had brought up with his nose upon the hard floor, and that prominent and lengthy member had resented the

outrageous treatment, for it was puffed up with resentment and black with indignation.

There were several abrasions, too, about his face, and his monster mole had been badly barked. Worse than all, his doughty right hand, so usually active and limber, was now swaddled up in bandages, and when, after a meagre breakfast, he took his way into the schoolroom, he was reasonably certain that much of the truth had leaked out amongst the boys, through the tattling agency of the servants, so that he felt it would be politic to fabricate something which should have a basis in fact. Therefore, whilst ascending his rostrum, under the curious eyes of his scholars, he was good enough to give them a little off-hand explanation, touching his battered condition, as thus:—

Good morning, young gentlemen,' his classic features lighting up with a grim, adventurous smile. 'I had the ill-luck, in coming hastily out of my bedroom last evening, to jam my hand in the door, and afterwards, ridiculous as it may seem, I caught my foot in the stair-carpet, and fell downstairs, bruising myself rather severely. However, I shall be all right again in a few hours. Ahem, let this be a lesson to all of you never to do anything in a hurry; now let us pray.' Accordingly his 'young gentlemen' curled their backs over their desks, while their sniggering faces sought each other's company, amid outstretched elbows and dirty fingers, and the pious prelude was unctuously gone through, and our great man, arising at its termination, and pushing his high stool to the front of the platform, proceeded to call up the classes, 'quickly and quietly,' and the mechanism of Waltonbury House Academy swung into its usual grooves.

But the lady of the house had also her part to play, and she played it in characteristic style, for be assured, she arose that morning with her wits about her, in the full splendour of her womanhood, unclouded by her recent colic—a very Phoebus of femininity. And her sweet sister arose at the same time, and was very like unto her.

Together they gazed at the shattered door, and decided that it must be repaired at once, that the sanctities of their sleeping-chamber might not be invaded.

'Call the gardener,' said Mrs Fledger to her sister, and straightway Angeletta's sonorous voice resounded through the house, when Grafton Budd promptly appeared. 'Look here, Budd,' sang out the fair Celestia to him, while she pointed at the shattered panel, 'you know all about this, don't you? and you've been at the bottom of it. If you hadn't been hanging about in that front garden, yesterday, it wouldn't have happened—mind you that. Now, don't you dare go blabbing about it to your pretty crew down town. If you do, mind I'll make it the worst day's work for you you ever did in your life. Now, listen to me. You run down to Mortiss & Gripsaw's and tell young Gripsaw to come and see me directly. Mind it must be Gripsaw; I won't have old Mortiss fooling about here; he's no good, only for backbiting. So, if Gripsaw isn't in, you wait till he is, and bring him along with you.'

'Very well, mum,' replied the gardener, turning to

depart.

And stop,' added Celestia. 'Don't you make half a day's holiday of it. You can run down there and back in five minutes, easy; and if you're not back again pretty soon, I'll come down after you, so now you cut.'

'All right, mum; I'll do the best I can, mum,' answered the gardener. 'But my poor old legs is not as lissome as

they used to be, and it's a nasty pull comin' back.'

'Oh, you be off with your blarney. That man makes me

sick,' remarked the gentle lady, turning to her sister.

'You're right, Essy; so he does me,' rejoined the

reverberant Angeletta.

Well, Mr Grafton Budd did his errand and returned to his mistress without any necessity for a supplementary search, and Mr Gripsaw came along with him, and smirkingly scrutinised the damage of that door. Could it have been possible that he had already been apprised of the method of its fracture? It might have been. The tongues of gossips are glib and expeditious, and the older they grow, the faster they seem to wag; and the gardener's tongue was of that description.

'Yes, you may well look at it; that door's just shattered, isn't it?' remarked the lady of the house. 'Sis and me was moving a heavy chest of drawers out of here yesterday, and the dratted things toppled over against it as we were getting 'em through. Now, I want you to put that right—quick. Don't mess my carpet; you'd better put something

down, and when it's done, send the bill in to Mr Fledger,

and mind you make the figure reasonable.'

'Very well, ma'am,' replied Mr Gripsaw, 'that'll be all right, and hadn't I better take a look at that chest of drawers, and see what I can do to 'em; they must have been a good deal damaged by a blow like this.' And there was a twinkle in the carpenter's eyes which meant a good deal.

'Oh, never mind about the drawers; we've put 'em in a spare room, and they won't matter for a while. morning,' and our admirable woman engineered herself out of the interview, leaving her sister to mount guard in the sanctuary, while Mr Gripsaw was busy with his repairs; and you may be sure she stayed close by until the work was completed, shielded him from the loquacities of the servants and guided him safely out of the house when he was ready to depart.

Now, these tricks and subterfuges of the Fledgers were excellent enough in their way. They had scattered a little dust before the eyes of their attentive observers, and although it obscured nobody's vision but their own, they had little desire to be convinced of the keen interest their 'goings on' excited downstairs and out of doors, and especially with the 'young gentlemen' of the academy itself.

Still, it must be confessed that after such a storm as I have been describing, it took the atmosphere some time to clear, the family weather remaining unsettled for several days afterwards. Menacing clouds would hang about the horizon, or scurry across the azure of the domestic heavens, marring in some degree the beautiful sunshine at Walton-

bury House.

Victor and vanguished avoided each other as much as possible, held no communication when they met at the meal table, and sailed past each other when they met on the stairs. And when, after a while, they found the natural use of their tongues again, it would only be to fling a taunt or hurl a hot defiance. And as night came on, our Horatio would shamelessly avoid the connubial couch and, seeking not to pillow his head on his dear wife's bosom, would retire, morose and gloomy, to his lair in the 'laboratory,' where I must tell you an odd mattress and a couple of

blankets, quietly brought down from the 'dormitory' by the buttons, at his master's command, made it possible for our poor principal to snatch a cat-nap slumber through the

long hours of his solitary night.

And furthermore, when it was apparent to the alert and listening Angeletta, whose room adjoined her sister's, that it was Mr Fledger's good pleasure to rest him downstairs, she would arise from her bed and creep noiselessly into Mrs Fledger's chamber, and crossing the room on tiptoe, that she might not disturb the great man underneath, would steal deftly into that warm place of honour by the fair Celestia's side, to repose in her sister's arms until the morning. . . .

Oh, happy people! Oh, sacred roof-tree! Oh, the delightful amenities of that much-regulated home, whose presiding genius so firmly dominated everything, holding in her grip the traces of entire control. Gentle, incom-

parable Mrs Fledger.

But then you see, it was all so rational, so inevitable, so unavoidably the outcome of a royal nature, that had been favoured in conception and blessed from the birth; for I am pleased to inform you that when this lady was born, she so impressed her fond parents (Mr and Mrs Crunch to wit) with her multiform perfections and heavenly disposition, that they were quite at a loss to select a name for her that might, in some degree, be indicative of her benign attributes. In vain they summoned to their imaginations the hosts of saintly women, saintly named, whose gracious annals ornament the past. Nothing was adequate, nothing would do.

And while they lingered, hoping that an inspiration might come to them, a bosom friend, of ethereal mould, to whom they had confessed their embarrassment (herself, I doubt not, only a few removes from heaven), artfully insinuated that they should call the little cherub Celestia, which name would be suggestive, she said, albeit remotely, of the beatific qualities of their infant paragon. And the wearied parents, having already ransacked the calendars of the saints, and feeling that they could do no more and no better, reluctantly acquiesced, and christened her Celestia accordingly. And to be sure this was well enough.

But when, several years afterwards, an indulgent heaven surprised the Crunches with a repetition of its former favour, and a second prodigy came to town, so like her sister in everything that she might have been mistaken for her, the father and mother were pitiably perplexed in rendering the newcomer a proportional justice at the baptismal font. For you will perceive that although they were both little Crunches they couldn't both be Celestias.

However, after much domestic ratiocination, those good folks squared the difficulty, in a makeshift way, by naming her Angeletta; and if it should appear to you, upon the first flush, that Celestia were the pearl of greater price, I will make haste to tell you that the possessor of that name was just as truly an angel as her sister, and that Angeletta, in her turn, was every whit as heavenly as the elder one.

In fact they were companion stars of an equal glory, of a radiant splendour that differed not, saving that, in point of time,—both of them bounding along with the same velocity, the elder seraph was always, by necessity, a trifle in advance of the younger one, on the road to somatic and soulful perfection . . . and yet, although I object to intrude a jarring note into the music of my lyric, even if it should only be a semi-quaver, I must whisper you that each of these little Crunches, Essy and Letty as they were afterwards known among their dull and vulgar acquaintances, was a twelve-pound baby at the birth. Each of them tangled its mother's hair over her eyes, and pulled a bunch of its father's whiskers out, the moment they could first lay hold of them and both in their turns scared Morpheus away from the parental chamber before the dawn, with their mighty and all too matutinal squalls.

Both gleefully quaffed the mug of beer that was so incontinently proffered them upon festive occasions, held in their honour, and would afterwards, in a 'fine frenzy,' whisk the empty mugs and perhaps a lot of the dinner-things off the table to their ruin on the floor, 'showing off' to the assembled company their thaumaturgic skill and dare-devil proclivities, and getting, it must be admitted, some such inconsequent reproof as this, by way of encomium, 'Hoity, tentul Tableson's

toity! well I declare!'

Yet, I beg you will not make too strong a point of these little peccadilloes of Essy's and Letty's, as I have already

strong-pointed them enough myself. Besides, we are assured, by a certain erratic theology, that even the angels are not perfect; that their evil parts, like plague-spots, still lie deep within them, sealed up for ever in the flesh of their

goodness.

However, it is with Celestia, the completed woman, that we have now to do, so let us, once for all, take a close look at her, a thing which, I am well aware, we should have done before, but I have ventured to defer a personal description of our paramount lady until I could offer it you as a mastersavour to the various spicy condiments contained in this

chapter. Here, then, you have it.

Mrs Fledger was a woman somewhat younger than her Like him, she was stout; to be exact, she was much stouter. But, unlike him, she was also very tall—allied to the elephant in all her massive, shapeless, flesh-bearing proportions. No stuffing at the breasts nor padding under the arms about her. No, indeed! Dame Nature had provided her with a good, honest abundance of adipose that called for no sort of accentuation, that loaded up her whole anatomy, and failed nowhere. Her face bravely sustained a fitting equilibrium with her tremendous figure, and was correspondingly huge all over. The cheeks were huge, the shaggy brows were ponderous, the forehead upright and gigantic, and the mouth and jaw enormous, while a chronic and fiery flush mantled habitually the vast superficies of her head and neck, and she wore her black hair in heavy rolls high above her ponderous temples. Still, let us not be too hard on the gentle dame, nor altogether unmindful of the accretions and distortions of villainous Time. A poem of two lives might have lain consecrate in the In her younger days this tender bosom of her past. Gorgon might have been an Aphrodite, or, haply, some beauteous nymph of the woods, albeit of ample proportions. Even the chronic crimson of her face was possibly but the staunch successor to that winsome blush which had erstwhile graced her charming maidenhood, had thrilled with delight the master's eye, and filled all his soul with tenderness.

Venus-like, in days gone by, she may have nestled on his breast in some deftly-chosen trysting-place amid the roses,-some Paphian bower, remote from vulgar gaze, all artless, dalliant and confiding; the adorable creature of his dreams and yearning fancies. And let us not doubt, it had been blithesome spring, budding, beautiful and gay, alive with gentle promise, nor that our Horatio, being young, was vernal and beautiful, too, -blithesome and gay, and abounding in gentle promises also; nor that he, from academic cares, had dwelt apart in sweet accoy deonerated, his soul aglow with Nature's sympathetic smiles, his books, diplomas, lucubrations flung aside, throughly to welcome his absorbing bliss. Sweet master mine! Sweet mistress thine!

Ah! think of it.

Ridiculous nonsense?

Well, well, perhaps it is. Yet, inasmuch as this veracious history deals less with love's dalliances than with those chastened friendships which are its natural successors, then -preserve to us this zestful picture, oh, ye gods!

CHAPTER VII

ROUGH WEATHER-THUNDER AND LIGHTNING.

THE unplenished cast of another chapter lies before us, gentle reader, and I will take you back, without prelude, to the period immediately following our principal's battle with the boys, his masterly victory, and his classic triumph, as previously set forth.

Now, the generous pulses of his late achievements had

flushed the master's nature.

So the great man marched about his schoolroom with splendid stride and exuberant flourish, dominating everything. Sometimes, by way of varying the performance, he would mount his rostrum and throw himself back sublimely in his arm-chair, cross his legs, draw out from its native depths behind him his red silk pocket handkerchief, and shaking it lightly, would proceed to blow his nose, trumpet fashion. A moment later, his right arm would be extended in superb equipoise upon the end of his silver ferule, which he had planted erect on the flank of his thigh, while he would pass his left hand grandly through his recurvient locks, discoursing to the boys upon a favourite topic, or laying down the law to them in some knotty point of erudition, failing to remember, in his supreme and happy dignity, that there was any such person as the fair Celestia, and that

she was his sovereign lady.

Well, upon one of these occasions he had been descanting in his usual strain upon the varied characteristics of the earth's surface, dwelling upon the magnitude of its mountains, the grandeur of its forests and the length of its rivers, 'rolling onwards forever towards the sea.' 'And yet,' exclaimed he, in a burst of enthusiasm, 'all this amazing diversity, impressive as it must be to my young gentlemen, none of whom, I presume, have travelled beyond the bounds of our own little country' (he had himself been to Paris on a cheap excursion). 'I say again, vast and diverse as it must all appear to you,—this grand concatenation of plains and valleys, lofty mountains, mighty forests, majestic rivers, and so forth, still they are as nothing, simply nothing, in comparison with the mighty ocean, the boundless, illimitable ocean, for that gigantic expanse, as I have remarked to you before, embraces more than four-fifths of the surface of our globe.

'Now, I do not recommend any of my boys to go to sea while there are so many noble avocations waiting for them upon land; yet I can well appreciate its fascinations for the mind of youth, for I have been, from time to time, no stranger to those fascinations myself. So I invite every boy to realise with me the boundless sublimity of the ocean. Let us imagine ourselves aloft in the heavens, and gazing down upon the whole bosom of the deep, north and south, from Pole to Pole, and east and west, from the Indian Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico, and thence onward, over the vast Pacific to far Cathay on the one hand and the Australian continent on the other. Do I make myself understood?' There was a pause, succeeded by a low hum of assent.

'Well, then, let us imagine, I say, that we see all this at a glance—the thousands and thousands of miles of restless waves, mountains high, that are never for a moment still since they were created. Think of the storms upon storms that have bellowed and blown over all that vast area followed, it may be, by a calm so deep, so impressive, so still, that the great expanse of water would be as smooth as a looking-glass for weeks and weeks. Then think, too, of the multitudes of men who have nobly perished in its depths, whose bones lie bleaching in the ooze, and who, for aught we can tell, have all been devoured by those great sea-monsters that inhabit the bottom of the ocean everywhere; leviathans, sea-serpents, and what not—creatures so hideous, so dire, so voracious, that it would make all our flesh creep to look at them. Do you follow me?' Another murmur of assent. 'But now, let us cast our eyes far beneath us and regard the luxurious beauties of the tropical islands, with their coral reefs, cocoanut palms and so on; and their dusky inhabitants, reclining on the shores, disporting themselves in the waters and breakers, and rowing about in their proas, or sailing as the poet says:—

"'Mid isles, whose summer smiles
No wintry winds annoy,
Whose groves were palm, whose airs were balm,
Where life was only joy!"

Then let us take a look at the interminable stately vessels, man's frail handicraft from a thousand dock-yards, ploughing their pathways through the surface of the deep; and let us think of the Roman galleons that brought great Cæsar to Britain, and of the ships of Tarshish that the Lord scattered with an east wind in those hoary times of yore; and later, of the great Armadas and Argosies of the Spanish main; and of Cortes, Pizarro, Nelson, and Columbus, and all the other great men of ancient and modern times who have gone down to the sea in ships; and then, confess with me'—outspreading his arms—'that the ocean, the vast, mysterious, restless ocean, is the sublimest conception of the hand of God, and brings home to us every day the inscrutable majesty of our Creator, and His wonderful works among the children of men; none of whom, remember, could dwell upon this earth with any sort of comfort without the all-abiding presence and beneficent influence of that world of waters. Only to think of it; we have the benefit of the wondrous tides, and the fertilising rains, and the Gulf Stream, all from the ocean which, as I have told you before, alone makes it possible for this favoured land of ours

to be inhabited; without it, we should be as cold as Nova Zembla, all shivering under hummocks of ice and snow; up to our eyes in furs, instead of engaging actively in trade, conducting schools, academies, and colleges, practising the arts and sciences, agriculture and so forth; which pursuits, I wish you never to forget, have made our nation the proud leader of all the peoples of the earth; and deservedly so, when we bear in mind our countless achievements in those realms; and long may they so continue, is my ardent wish and prayer.'...

Our great man paused to take a long breath, then trumpeted with his nose and pocket handkerchief again, and

returned to the charge.

'Now, I have said enough to convince every one of you that this is a great subject—a very great subject—and that even such a person as myself can only hope to do imperfect justice to it. Ahem! Briefly, then, as touching this matter of the ocean, the equinoves, trade-winds, volcanic islands of the deep, the comparative sizes and dispositions of the land and the water, the parallels of latitude and longitude, the ecliptic, equator, the volcanic belt, and so forth, it occurs to me that I can make myself more generally understood if I take some of you into the house and illustrate my remarks by a practical reference to the terrestrial globe-one of a very handsome pair, terrestrial and celestial, which I purchased some time back expressly for use in this academy, although I have not had time as yet to find a suitable place for them in the school.' (The latter postulate being a fib, in extenuation of which our pedagogue might have explained that his better half had taken a violent fancy to the aforesaid globes the instant they came into the house—especially the celestial one, which, on account of its name, she instinctively felt should be hers, and had established them as articles of furniture, one on each side of the case of stuffed birds that stood on the shaky little table in the parlour window; and had forbidden her spouse, despite his indignant protests, to remove them. 'And mind, if you do,' said she, 'you may depend upon it, I'll walk my stalks into your schoolroom and fetch 'em back again: such expensive things as them, should be taken care of in the parlour, where they can't be knocked about by a parcel of boys. You've got your maps down there; plenty of 'em, too, I'm sure. Take and use them, as you 'ave done all along.')

'However,' remarked Mr Fledger, continuing his address to the 'young gentlemen,' 'they were provided for just such an occasion as the present. Now, therefore, all those boys of the first and second classes who would like to accompany me to the house and enjoy the privilege I have proposed to you, hold up your right hands.' Whereupon there was a flurry amongst the scholars addressed, followed by a prompt display of their dexter paws, and Mr Fledger, graciously descending from his Jovian heights, headed a grinning and eager procession in the direction of the drawing-room of Waltonbury House.

Marching across the 'playground,' through the 'class-room,' past the 'laboratory,' over the prize Tottenham Court Road oilcloth laid down in the hall; yes, and by all that is sacred or profane—it doesn't matter which, so desperate was the deed—landed that crowd of dirty-booted, tentacle-fingered schoolboys, plump in the worshipful presence of Mrs Celestia Fledger, who was sitting in privy-council with her sister in the drawing-100m. Yes; landed them in that 'parlour,' that presence chamber; nay, that citadel, which was so individually and forbiddingly HERS!

Oh, Fledge, Fledge! Your amazing foolhardihood! Why, you wouldn't have done a more outrageous thing if you had planted yourself down in your lady-love's lap. Now, was there a screw loose somewhere in your upper storey, or did your supra-mundane ecstacies carry you away? Impossible to say. Perhaps a little of both.

Well, they all filed in (master and pupils) upon that flame-coloured, immaculate carpet, whereof I had the temerity to make some disparaging remarks in a previous chapter, and as they did so, sullying its spotless blazonry with streaks and pellicles of mud from the bottoms of their unwiped boots.

'Now, all of you,' spoke up the master; 'this way, please, quickly and quietly,' leading them ostentatiously towards the bay window, 'and don't kick against the things. Ah! take care of those gilt table legs; mind those glass shades. Come along. There's room for all of you round the globes here with a little management.' And accordingly, his grinning scholars, with a great show of docility,

spread themselves about, and permeated the whole chamber like a swarm of ants in a sugar basin, tilting against the fancy furniture, sweeping down antimacassars and dovleys, and jeapordising the numerous erected nicknacks, shaded ornaments and sprawling trophies, which confronted them at every turn.

Meanwhile the fair Celestia arose from her seat in majestic astonishment, and her horror-stricken sister arose likewise.

For a few brief seconds our sovereign lady was silent, not caring at the first flush of the thing to exhibit herself in her strongest colours to the assembled 'young gentlemen,' although she considered them 'mere brats.' when she saw the dirt-marks on her carpet, and the swarming of the juveniles round about her gewgaws and decorations, her swelling indignation struggled to express itself, and the prevailing pyrosis in her face assumed a darker tinge in her effort to hold back, for a time, her blatant onslaught.

'Sir! Mr Fledger!' she gasped out, and her nostrils quivered with suppressed rage, 'what does this mean? I demand, sir, that you tell me what all this can possibly

mean?'

'The meaning is apparent enough, I think,' responded the principal, with easy nonchalance, although the beauty spots were rising in his pasty-white cheeks. selected a few of my young gentlemen to study the use of the globes with me. You needn't be alarmed; they know how to conduct themselves.'

'You had no business, Mr Fledger, to bring your boys in here under any pretext whatever,' retorted the mistress. 'I will not be intruded upon in this way. A fine thing indeed! Is there to be no privacy for me in any part of

my house?'

'The matter was unavoidable, madam,' rejoined the master, his coolness giving place to choler. 'It was necessary to have the use of the globes. I purchased them for that purpose. There has been some difficulty in getting them placed in the schoolroom; and briefly, if the mountain won't come to Mahomet—why Mahomet must go to the mountain—that's all.'

'Now you give me none of your high-flown rubbish, Mr

Fledger, for it don't go down with me,' sharply responded the woman, suddenly dropping her proprieties, and swinging back with a vim into the old grooves. 'You've no business in here—any of you,' glaring round at the embarrassed scholars; 'and if you are the young gentlemen you're made out to be you'll just walk straight out of a lady's parlour quicker than you came into it, globes or no globes, and never you mind about Mahomet nor his mountain.'

Now this was throwing down the gauntlet indeed. This was treading on our principal's toes with a vengeance. This was wrestling with his jurisdiction and usurping his authority, as Mr Fledger instantly perceived. Nay, more, it was an attempt to degrade him in the eyes of his pupils. It made him furious, and he resolved to fight this battle out to a finish, and to rehabilitate himself by establishing, for the nonce, a school-militant in his lady's drawing-room.

Ah! it was a gallant resolution—one that was worthy of our great Frederick; like Scipio, our noble Roman had carried the war into Africa, and by this splendid enterprise had left himself no alternative but to win a victory or suffer ignominious defeat.

'Defeat! defeat!' upon a question of his own proper and particular supremacy? No, never! It should never be. The consequences would be too disastrous, as he quickly foresaw. 'No!' he said to himself; the struggle doubtless would be hot and bitter. Well, he was used to that; nevertheless he would take care that the result should be decisive in his own favour. Vi et armis et va victis! and then as soon as it was all over, and he didn't care how soon that might be, he would march back to his stronghold at the bottom of the garden, fully vindicated before all his 'young gentlemen,' his tutors and the servants—proudly victorious and covered with glory.

Now you'll admit this was a gallant resolution and a splendid programme, meriting, of course, complete success, which, I tell you beforehand, it failed to achieve.

Well, then, our heroic preceptor being firmly resolved to hurl forth his fulminations in front of the battle, unhooked his trusty cane from its button-hole, like an artilleryman unlimbering his gun, trained it over the heads of his pupils, and turning his back upon his better-half, ordered his boys to 'remain in that parlour,' do as he had told them, and form up in class round the globes in the bay window, capping his commands with the prophetic flourish that he 'intended to make it plain to everybody who was master in that house.' There was, however, some show of wavering for a few moments, amongst the 'young gentlemen,' Mrs Fledger's queenly interdictions having impressed them considerably; but the habit of obedience to the principal quickly prevailed, and they all crowded forward to the big window, where our great man had already taken up his position, some of them blushingly, and the remainder in angry defiance and with a manifest inclination to be quarrelsome, in emulation of their seniors.

'Amblesides, you under-bred little pig!' snarled Aldermaston in that youngster's face (the boy was fat and cheeky, and was trying to squeeze past him in the disorder), 'Amblesides, you little pig, what are you doing here? Sneaked in somehow, I suppose. Don't you dare

to get in front of me now.'

Well, I can't see over your shoulders,' retorted Master

A.; 'and you're poking your elbow in my mouth.'

'Then why don't you keep behind? You've no business here, you little cad,' replied the bigger boy. 'Nip him, Pukeley, you can reach him better than I can. Don't let him get in front of us,' and the complaisant Pukeley did accordingly 'nip him,' gathering up a morsel of the small boy's hinder thigh between his thumb and finger, and twisting it round with such forceful dexterity that the unfortunate Amblesides found himself howling and dancing with pain before he knew it.

'Shut up, you little sweep!' growled Aldermaston in his ear. 'If you dare to peach on us, mind, we'll skin you

clean to-morrow; won't we, Pukeley?'

'That we will,' rejoined his co-adjutor, in a venomous

whisper.

'Give it him again, Pukeley,' urged Aldermaston, under his breath; but Master Amblesides had had quite sufficient of this kind of thing, and made a sudden dive to get to the front rank, and had almost succeeded when he felt a tug at his ankle, which overbalanced him. To save himself from falling he clutched at a rigid something just in front, he was in too frantic a state to notice what. It was the corner of a spindle-legged table. The effort was useless; in fact, it was worse than useless, as it did but double the drawback and magnify the downfall, for the ankle was pulled still harder, and Amblesides went sprawling on to the carpet, taking with him—the table, the stuffed birds and the glass case, an antimacassar which had draped it, and a huge vase, enfountained with coloured grasses, which had blossomed perenially upon its summit.

Cra-ash! went down the whole concern in a ruinous heap upon Amblesides, who was literally buried under table-shanks, birds of paradise, broken glass, Indian pheasants, pigeons, cuckoos, decayed bark, chunks of

moss, and all the accompanying fineries. . . .

Now this was an appalling catastrophe, or if you would have it phrased in Fledgeresque—It was truly a coacervation most dire, when we bear in mind the sacred, inviolable character of those trophied frailties, thus born to swift destruction; and duly consider, as we certainly should, all the exasperating circumstances of the case, as they affected the principal and august personages involved. . . .

Well, there was a brief and deadly dumbness in that celestial parlour for a few momentous seconds, and then—

the hounds of war were unleashed.

Our reckless Horatio, taken aback by this sudden and overwhelming misfortune, sought to mend matters by rushing headlong into action, and so made a furious charge upon the prostrate Amblesides, the apparent author of the mischief, and also upon the ornithologic débris which was piled upon him, because he felt it had stood in the way, slashing the living and the dead with prodigal impartiality, and hurling forth his wordy thunders against all undersized schoolboys and spindle-legged tables, glass cases and stuffed birds.

Swish! thwack! 'You're a nasty small boy, Amblesides. Too small for your age, sir, and therefore precocious, mischievous and headstrong.' Thwack! 'Devilishly headstrong, sir, in spite of all I can do.' Slash! 'And confound this stupid paraphernalia, I say.' Crash! fluff! squash! 'If this nuisance hadn't been stuck in everybody's way it couldn't have happened.' Swish! thwack! sla-a-sh! 'Get up, sir, and don't lie grovelling there

amongst the broken glass.' Slash! slash! thwack! 'Get up, I tell you.'

You may be certain it was a piquant and masterly exhibition, even for Waltonbury House Academy; and I am well persuaded that at another time, and set forth in a more suitable framing, it would have been hailed with delight by the assembled 'young gentlemen'; it would have been glorious fun for them to see the feathers fly, the shattered glass still further break and the dust go up in a little cloud from Master Amblesides' ill-kept, but wellfilled garments, under the bounding impact of that sprightly rod of correction. Yea, it would have been music in their ears to have listened to the swish of that nimble cane as it came down again and again upon the plump little haunches of that pudgy schoolboy, who lay squirming and squealing amid the fiery blushes of the 'parlour' carpet; for a school full of boys is like a kennel full of dogs, the strong rejoice in the discomfiture of the However, under the present aspect of things, there seemed to be too great a probability of danger all round to make the spectacle an agreeable one to the onlookers; in fact, they had only to turn and behold the blazing countenance of Mrs Fledger as she shook herself in the rear, like a bull preparing to attack, to be certain that their worst fears would be realised, and that a painful crisis was at hand, which must involve everybody.

'Whell! Fledger, whell! upon my soul, this beats all I ever did see in my born days,' screamed the enraged woman. 'You've brought your pigs to a fine market, haven't you? Now, if you're not ashamed of yourself, you must be wicked enough to shame the devil. Didn't I know how it would be, directly you dared to bring those young reptiles into my place?' she sung out with increasing vehemence, shaking a forefinger up in the air. 'Out of my way, you imps of mischief,' she continued, knocking the 'young gentlemen' to right and left of her like so many ninepins, and bouncing up to the scene of the tragedy. 'And what are you walloping those poor, dumb,'dead things for, you old fool; and that little wretch, too, as if it was all his doings. He wasn't the beginning of it. Give me hold of that cane, for you're no good,' and she snatched the weapon out of the master's hand; 'I know who it is that

wants this laid about their backs, and they shall have it too.' Then turning fiercely upon Aldermaston and Pukeley, who just behind her, were trying to assume a superior smile, and looking exceedingly pale about the gills, she collared first one and then the other, and for all that they desperately tried to kick her shins, twirled them around, this way and that and laid the cane about their backs, shoulders, hams, calves, anywhere she wanted to, with such fury that they seemed nothing but pigmies in her hands. 'I saw your beautiful tricks; I heard what you said if your master didn't, you young devils,' she cried; 'how do you like that, Swish! swish! slash! 'You call yourselves young gentlemen, I suppose; pretty young gentlemen you are. Take that, 'swish! 'and that,' slash! 'and that,' sl-ash! 'and that,' thra-ash! 'and perhaps another time you'll know how to conduct yourselves in a lady's parlour. That case of birds took my poor father all his life long to collect. did, you young hounds, it did, and stood on his sideboard for twenty years and more, and now for you to dare to come in here and knock it all to pieces!' Slash! thra-ash! 'Clear out, before my temper gets the better of me, or I'm likely to be the death of you. And out you all go this very minute. Look sharp!' and down came that cane again athwart many a boy's back. Slash! slash! swish! thrash! in a furious and general onslaught, while our poor scholars started in a rush to get out of the room; the gentle Angeletta lending a hand in the rout, by boxing their ears and knocking their heads together, while in the mêlée that ensued, chairs were overturned, antimacassars torn down and trampled upon, and numerous ornaments and Neither parley artificial flowers came to sudden grief. nor protest was of the slightest avail, one virago aiding the other, and in a few moments the whole dis-orderly crowd, fragments of the parlour frippery clinging about their heels, bolted down the hall-way whence they had come, scoring that spick and span oilcloth with their nailed shoes, nor did they bring up, until the slamming and banging of the doors in their rear gave them assurance that they were safely back in their good old schoolroom, where you may be sure, the manner of their return was highly commended, and themselves greeted with lively expressions of wonder and praise by their schoolmates, who, restant in

their old quarters, had not felt the benefit of this charming visit to 'a lady's parlour.'

Now, our gallant Horatio had attempted to stem the tide of that ignominious retreat, but his gentle spouse laid the cane about his head and shoulders with such desperate and damaging muscularity that he, too, was constrained to fly before the foe, nor did she suffer him to halt until she had driven him into his sanctum and slammed the door on him.

It was all over, and our poor preceptor staggered into the middle of the room, boiling with rage and shame, and trembling with indignation from head to foot. He cast a wild glance around him, and felt measurably thankful, despite his distress, to be safe in his refuge, if only for a time. Yes, here at least, all was inviolate; everything was obedient to his master-will. Here, thank heaven, there was no trace of the ruthless hand which had punished him; yet stay! what was this on the floor close at his heels? . . . It was our principal's cane, that dread instrument of past innumerable flagellations, itself now beaten into shreds.

You see—there had been many backs and shanks and only one poor cane; and it had freely yielded itself in hearty singleness for the collective good—a martyr to immolative duty—and now lay back-broken and useless upon that laboratory floor, flung there by Mrs Fledger as a parting reminder of her completed victory, and was a token, both symbolic and tangible, of the principal's disrupted power

and departed glory.

Mr Fledger gazed at it, while the burning blush of shame tingled his cheeks; and as he gazed he fancied he saw a likeness to himself in that dismal remnant lying there. For, speaking metaphorically, he too had opposed himself habitually to the backs and shanks of froward insubordinations, and had freely dispensed himself for the general good, a martyr to immolative duty,—Fledger the heroic always, Fledger the sublime! But alas! the forces opposed to him seemed to have been legion, and now his light was in peril of being swallowed up of darkness. At all events, he was emphatically conscious, just at present, that he was only one poor schoolmaster, and that if he, too, was not back-broken, the aches and smartings of his late castigation seemed to promise that woeful consummation.

Then could it be possible that he, too, was a broken

castaway? never again to fill his former proud position of honour and renown. . . .

He sunk into his arm-chair, whose well-worn seat soothingly received him. 'Truly,' he groaned, 'a man's worst foes are those of his own household.' Long and sorrowfully he gazed upon the remains of that allusive cane, wholly unmindful of the dancing flourishes, signs, and symbols posted up around him, his own sciential writing on the walls, and as his eyes became fixed upon the battered relic, his fancy tabbed it with the rascal words, *Hie jacet Horatio*. . . . It was too much—too much—his waning fortitude could bear him up no longer, and clenching his hands over his eyes in an agony of shame, he burst into tears, completly dismastered, and overcome. . . .

Yes, let us breathe it gently—a solitary mourner at his self-bereavement—our Horatio wept!

Ahem, not that I would have you suppose that our great man was given to tears under every emergency. No, no! our Fledger was too game a cock for that, and never unhinged the flood-gates of his spirit, except for a calamity of the most dreadful nature. But this, 'Ah! this,' he moaned to himself, was a disaster so overwhelming, so outrageous, so hideous, that the more he dwelt upon it, the For once, and at last, his bounding more he wilted. egoism had altogether vanished, and he could face the accursed situation with no sort of equanimity. Ah! how should a gentleman, such as he, ever win himself back out of this immeasurable disgrace; how unbury himself from the deadly mire of this contumely? How scramble out of the depths of this Stygian pool on to the sunny heights of his cherished self-esteem? More still-how could he ever hope to reinstate himself in the eyes of his pupils, who assuredly would never forget, so long as they were schoolboys, the atrocious escapade of this fateful day? No, the whole thing seemed utterly, damnably, miserably impossible Wherefore our master sunk still further into the hollow of his arm-chair, yielded up his cock-dom and wept.

Could the sternest censor look for a brokenness more attrite? I think not. . . .

Now, in the midst of those gruesome lamentations the laboratory door opened and an odd little figure appeared in the doorway.

Hereupon, our preceptor, much abashed, endeavoured to recall that lofty air that was so proper to him, and springing to his feet, made a great show of resentment at the intrusion. For he had been caught in a prostrate, limp and lachrymose condition, and he was unable to find words to conceal his chagrin.

That the intruder was simply his own daughter made no difference to him, for I must explain that our great man was quite unaccustomed to betray any weaknesses of this sort before the members of his family. Not that he was more natively cold and proud than other men, nor altogether wanting in the sentiments of a husband and father. But the cardinal point he had always kept in view, was the maintenance of his own authority, and this quite as emphatically in his family circle as within the walls of his 'academy.' I don't say that he was disposed to be tyrannical, or cruel, but that, according to his lights, it belonged to the immutable order of things that he, being the man, and because he was the man, he must be the well-spring and dispensary of the family wisdom, the unerring guide for conduct in his folks at home, and inasmuch as he regarded himself as the sole originator of his children, ignoring his betterhalf's achievements in that mutual business, so he concluded that he was morally at liberty to mould them precisely as he chose.

He had been actuated by the same autocratic spirit in his original dealings with his wife, affirming to himself at the outset—that she had not that priceless gift of a higher sense with which he himself was so singularly endowed, so he deemed it her especial privilege to be the nearest recipient of his exceeding wisdom, and he looked for her to be continually in the will to imbibe and assimilate the same—with everything besides which should correspond to it.

Nevertheless, as he did not consider himself always infallible, he would be pleased to give attention to any modifications of his views and wishes, which her emotional nature might impel her to suggest to him through her more limited intelligence, and from her less exalted point of view; but always with this proviso fully admitted,—that she should offer him these emendations modestly, and with no ulterior purpose of ruling him, and should besides, in all things and at all times, conduct herself as the weaker vessel.

Now, I am not prepared to say how these conceptions of the master's mind would have worked, supposing the fair Celestia's soul could have been attuned to the patriarchal spirit of her lord, and that our magnific preceptor had really found himself to be the centre and lodestar of his family, though I believe he would have made a good enough spouse and paterfamilias, after his kind, because, in these matters, at least, he was honest and conscientious. But the trouble was, that it suited not the character of his mistress to fill a subordinate rôle, in the least degree, whether with her husband or anyone else. It had been all very well for the master to ramp and hector in his schoolroom (it had not yet blossomed out as an 'academy') in the midst of his timid and 'elementary' schoolboys, with whom a mole-heap might be made to stand for a mountain and the sorriest hack passed off as a Pegasus. But it was quite another thing, when he attempted to override and obfuscate the mature and sturdy Celestia.

In the easy days of their courtship, our Horatio's chosen one had often trilled to him, by way of pleasant persiflage, snatches of a song popular at that time—'I'll be no submissive wife, no, not I!'—and the master had misliked it not, supposing that the little ebullition was nothing but a playful protest, a harmless fluttering of the bird he was about to encage.

But afterwards, when the wooing was over and they had both settled down to business, he found to his cost that she had meant every word of it in downright earnest, and in after time, when the hated strains of that song assailed his ears, which they sometimes did at a musical party, they sent a shiver down his back, and racked his aching senses with a devilish endorsement. Alas! poor Fledge.

Furthermore, it has been sufficiently apparent that our schoolmaster was not an Apollo in point of manly beauty, while, as for the fair Celestia,—well, it must be confessed that the delicate bloom of her girlhood, etc., etc., and so forth, had already vanished, what time she accepted our Horatio for her liege lord, and I must confide to you that she took him, poor man, as a stop-gap to her wasting affections, as a barrier of flesh and blood across that ugly road to single cussedness, down which ruffian Time was speeding her. Yes, hooked him as a makeshift, fell upon him as a

dernier ressort, in default of that earlier 'handsomer, nicer gentleman,' who in the rosy days of her youth, had been indeed her beau ideal,—that favoured gallant, whom she had so eagerly, so perseveringly sought at many a country-dance and roystering picnic, and who yet, after all, had so unaccountably failed to abase himself at the instance of her primal charms!...

And when we add to all of this, as we certainly must, that Mrs Fledger had money while Mr Fledger had none, we shall easily perceive that the conditions between these two were entirely hostile to that autocratic sway which our schoolcrafty incomparable had proposed to himself; indeed it may be finally explained that when the gentle Celestia had once permitted her devoted Horatio to conduct her to the altar, she would by no means suffer him to lead her half an inch in any other direction, in fact, firmly resolved from that time onward to be master and mistress and leader herself.

As for the 'dear children,' their father's 'property,' the truth was, they belonged body and soul to their mother, our preceptor's braggart theories notwithstanding.

It is, of course, conceivable that, in the beginning, these children had a natural love for both parents, but for their father it became 'smaller by degrees and beautifully less,' until, with most of them, it dwindled down to nothing. For not only did Mrs Fledger engross their young lives with her animal cares, after the manner of most mothers, but the soaring spirit of the master augmented this by lifting him so far above his children that it was impossible he should remain a competitor for their affections. For a time he did try, not willing to relinquish anything which he held to be his own. But it dawned upon him that chemical experiments and baby-play did not go well together; for occasionally, should any of his youngsters be clambering about him while he was absorbed with his hobbies, the explosion of a gas-jar would cut their faces or singe off their eyelashes, or at another time, the fumes of chlorine or arsenious acid would nearly choke them, without counting their 'naughty wilfulness' in meddling with his various and often poisonous preparations directly his back was turned, or their stained fingers and ruined pinafores, and the consequent fury of the maternal protests thereat. So finally,

in disgust, he set up a 'laboratory,' as we have seen, and rigorously excluded his children therefrom, and was in the habit of withdrawing to it whenever his itch for scientifical exploits seemed likely to tickle him to death. Thus he left his better-half to direct the activities of her hopeful brood, to mark them deeply with the flaring brand of her own aggressive personality, and to show them, withal, by practical illustration, day by day, and all the time, the inferior status of a mere master and father when compared with her own, according to that brazen self-enunciation which filled the total of her moral code.

Hence it followed that these children gave our principal the 'go-by' in their juvenile reckonings, especially upon those occasions when their mother's whims or wishes antagonised those of her lord, and it naturally eventuated that in the various domestic cabals in which Aunt Letty and the servants were not seldom implicated, and during the oftrecurring disturbances with the head of the household resulting therefrom, those dear little things kept the family at a fever heat by openly planning or covertly plotting on their mother's side.

It is true that they had been taught to come to him periodically, with their wants innumerable and often with their arrogant demands, and they thought it right that they should feed upon him, use him, draw from him as if he were a bank, occasionally with a prelude of sham caresses or shallow make-believes,—sweeteners these for their ulterior purposes; but more often they fell upon him in their prevailing spirit of careless selfishness, unmasked and unabashed, and the master had seen these things plainly, and had posted them up in his memory with a cynical reservation very unfavourable to fatherly kindness.

Still, it had pleased him to indulge them with a mannish pride and his usual flourish, so long as his parental instincts were young and strong,—until he found, indeed, by accumulated experience, that he was getting nothing in return for all his concessions, nothing at least that he might call his own, and that little remained to him in the connection but the empty attributes of a husband and the charmless onerations of a father. And for the reasons thus, that no one to whom he had given his name would render him any but the flimsiest pretences of affection, he had wearied of the

whole lop-sided business, his own emotional nature having suffered numberless recoils, and had felt it proper to seal up his softer parts within him, wondering how he could ever have been fool enough to take upon himself the burdens of a benedict; and so the original kernal of the scholical heart, which it must be confessed had never been remarkably sweet, was withering up in the heats and ferments of his domestic life, so that his outer shell had case-hardened, and he had become mock austere, pompous and disaffectionate, a misanthropist, in petto, a misogamist, in fact. . . .

I am giving you a picture whose parts lack soul and softness. The foreground is vulgar, the distance hard and dry, the intervening stretches—trite and commonplace; no silvery haze hangs over it, no mists of fancy linger there. 'Tis a gallimaufry of ugliness, by better motives unrelieved. Are there no hidden beauties then, to lend it higher value? No underlying gems that kindly quest may yet discover? Yes, there are, and we will be careful not to miss them as we press along.

Meanwhile, take we the picture as it is, a maniple of memory looking to the shady side of subterfuge—and urging the question: Are the Fledgers the only people it should represent?

CHAPTER VIII

A RUCKLE IN THE HOUSE OF FLEDGER

LET us now scrape acquaintance with Miss Constance Fledger, the master's eldest born, who intruded, you know, so abominably upon her father at the very acme of his affliction; and when we have learnt something about her we shall be better prepared to return to the principal, whom we left so dismally immured in his laboratory.

First then, to describe the daughter.

Now, I should be delighted to go into ecstacies over our young lady's 'delicate features,' her 'heavenly eyes,' 'angelic expression,' 'peaches and cream complexion,' 'wealth of golden tresses,' and so forth, because I am sensible that belonging as she did to the period of 'sweet sixteen,' she should be credited with a now-or-never affirmation of her loveliness,—an artful natural endeavour so unmistakable that it would be be ak our instant recognition. But the truth forbids all this, and compels me to tell you that Miss

Conny was 'exceedingly plain.'

The unattractiveness of Conny's face resulted entirely from its strange incongruities and its abnormal magnitude, the features being entirely out of proportion with each other, and the whole singular physiognomy several sizes too large for the squat little figure to which it belonged. Still, there was no ugliness, pure and simple, and the features were alone made ridiculous by their relative misproportion. Thus, the nose, though long and masculine, like the father's, was superior in form to its prototype, was a good enough nose in its way, and would have told to fine advantage on the face of a man six feet high, and large in proportion; but then, in contrast to this, the eyes, which were of the dark, funny and twinkling variety, were small enough to have suited a new-born babe. The mouth, if it had been trained to keep shut, would by no means have been a bad one, providing it were looked at from a sufficient distance, for the strong, shapely lips and regular teeth were fit furnishings for the face of a giant; while the small, round chin and little knee of a forehead would have done very well for some nice youth, whose mental and moral forces were not adapted to great achievements. The outspread, ample face, although neither coarse nor brutal, had plenty of nice colour, like the mother's; and the massive head was set squarely down, with the smallest possible intervention of neck, between a pair of high and angular shoulders, which, with their long-arm appendages, seemed to jut out in awkward protest from her otherwise stunted and barrelbuilt anatomy, and this divergency was rendered yet more comical by her straight-cut, low-necked dress, with its hideous, indispensable 'bertha,' which, spreading out like a valance around the upper edge, made the whole extraordinary figure look as broad as it was tall; while the long, black hair, strained away from her forehead by a 'poll comb,' hung in ringlets, lank and limp, about the nape of her neck, and straggled down her shapeless back.

But in other respects, besides the foregoing, Miss Conny

was an outsider from the family circle, bearing, it is true, a general resemblance to her parents and her brothers and sisters, yet possessing a character radically different from theirs, for, in a house full of turbulence and self-seeking, she was the only one kindly and peaceful.

Almost from a baby, her remarkable uncomeliness had subjected her to ill-natured criticism from her kinsfolk, and feeling, child though she was, that she could never hold her own against the lot of them, she early began to draw apart, took no share in their boisterous gambols, and was content to amuse herself alone with their broken playthings, which she would furbish up to her own satisfaction by a legerdemain peculiar to herself,—restoring the hairy glories to some toy horse or wooden sheep that had been fleeced of its frouziness, or taking in hand a derelict doll that had been scalped, dismembered and tossed aside for some fresher fancy, would sew up its sawdust wounds, bind on its arms and legs, and putting it to bed up to its chin, with its flaxen locks decently unrumpled, its smudgy face disgrimed of dirty fingerings, and an absurd little home-made nightcap tied cosily down over its cranial blemishes, would treat it to a feast of barmecidal cure-alls and sops of comfort, duly dished up and paraded in her own empty, tiny tea-things.

Mrs Fledger used frequently to remark to her dear Angeletta, after they had both taken stock of the poor girl's small, unshapely body and huge, serio-comical face: 'I can't make that child out, Sis; she doesn't look a bit like one of mine. Just behold her high shoulders and her jolt head and crooked limbs, and then see how upright and shapable all the others are. I've watched her for a long time, and she doesn't grow a bit. You mark my words, Letty, if it isn't going to be a dwarf, and—you know what I am—I shall hate to see her about the place.' To which admirable sentiments and forecasts her sister responded in identical echo, adding this practical suggestion in view of the urgency of the case: 'Let's take her, Etty, by her heels and the nape of her neck, at bed-time, and pull her out well, and see what that'll do.'

And for a time this delicate treatment was actually put into practice by the two women, despite the shrieks and protests of their helpless victim, and in defiance of the raging interdictions of Mr Fledger, whose lofty attention, absorbed though it might have been with his usual hobbies down in the laboratory, would sometimes be arrested by the unearthly rumpus going on over his head; and upon such occasions he would part company with his gases and solutions for a few grudging moments, and rush upstairs to the nursery, several steps at a time, desperately endeavouring to gain a view of the proceedings therein by landing himself upon the right side of the door before it could be slammed and locked in his face; and if he succeeded, would promptly take his vehement part in the family diaphonics. . . .

Our little friend had a dulcet and condolent nature, albeit she was seldom the recipient of any sympathy herself, that being a scant quantity at Waltonbury House. It is true, she had few opportunities for its exercise amongst the other members of the family, who had, as you may judge, a very ardent faculty of taking care of themselves, especially one against the other. Still there were occasions when an object for commiseration would present itself to Miss Conny's sensibilities. For instance:

It happened one day that Mollie Buttox, having boiled a ham, had placed the smoking and savoury viand outside on the kitchen window-sill to cool, and had gone her ways about her other duties. Now, whether by inadvertence on her part, or through the ingrain cussedness of a new-boiled ham, when left to itself on a sloping window-ledge, I am unable to say, but, at all events, the moment Molly's back was turned, that crafty piece of pig slid quietly down off its cooling-place plump on to the bone-littered waste in front of the mastiff's kennel, and Cæsar, whose olefactories had enjoined him to pay it particular attention, pounced upon it instanter, and treated himself to an early dinner, which was as delicious and substantial as it was fortuitous.

After a proper interval, Mrs Buttox came out to fetch in that ham, which she expected to find cool, plump, and inviolate, and this was what greeted her astounded gaze: a bare and sloping window-sill; a broken dish beneath it; a new and nicely-polished marrow bone lying at her feet; and a recumbent and surfeited Cæsar, whose eyes were heavy with post-prandial slumberings, and whose avid and oleaginous jowls dropped fatness.

Now the cook, though 'a highly respectable person,' was not, as I have hinted before, of an easy-going disposition, being so continually aglow, I suppose, with the heats of her avocation, and when she beheld this hideous finale, and realised, as she did, the very serious scrimmage with her mistress which it must entail, her face furied up with the fires of a dozen kitchen-ranges, and her outbursts were so exceedingly scorching and unchaste that I must forbear to record them. Suffice it to say that she ran back into the kitchen, and seizing a flat-iron that was warming on the hob, rushed out and hurled it at the offender with all her might, whereupon an instant howl of rage and pain, blending harmoniously with her own maledictions, went up through the open window, and Cæsar lay a-writhing in front of his barrel with a badly-smashed nose and a broken leg.

The servants, the children and the mistress came down quickly into the turmoil, and supplied their several quotas to the rousing entertainment, in which, it is needless to say, that Celestia Fledger and Mary Buttox sustained the lead-

ing parts.

And when it was all over, and the cook had been silenced, and the unfortunate Cæsar had received supplementary punishment with a stout, convenient broom handle at Mrs Fledger's unsparing hand, and the servants had slunk away, and the other children had tired of mauling the dog, Miss Conny took up the business, and was unsparing with her sponge and hot water, her splints and her bandages; nor did she abate her services for a whole fortnight,—making a rag cushion for the dog to lay his broken leg upon, and running out to him at meal-times with consolatory tit-bits from her own plate, until the patient was fully recovered, and could be seen sitting up perkily at the mouth of his barrel, full of bright-eyed expectancy for Fortune's further favours.

But, if Miss Constance was disposed to be kind to things and people about her, it must be owned that she was equally complaisant with herself, mainly in the matters of eating and drinking; nor had she, as a child, been altogether

guileless in her gustativeness.

She would hover round the cook when anything especially nice was in preparation, and would usually manage to achieve a foretaste of Mollie's good things by a slitherous process peculiar to herself in the Fledger family, yet art-

fully adapted to gratify that relish for adulation which, as it was one of Mrs Buttox's few weak points, so it was also the one in which she was least accustomed to be assailed,—her usual treatment by 'the people upstairs' being more or less

brutal and commanding.

'Oh! Mary, how nice that mincemeat smells,' our little diplomat would remark. 'Ma says you make very good mincemeat; and that apple-sauce, isn't that beautiful? And just look at those lovely jam pies; how clever you are at cooking.' Then, after a pause, 'I don't believe ma'll let me have one of those pies; she doesn't give me half what she

gives the others.'

'Yes, Miss Conny,' replied Mrs Buttox, 'I know my business, but I don't get much credit for it in this house. Where's your mother? Upstairs? And your aunty, where's she? Out in the garden? Well, then,' chuckled the old lady, 'open yer tater-trap,' and Conny's capacious mouth expanded to its utmost dimensions, when-blob! in went a big gravy-spoon full of the mincemeat, followed pretty quickly by another of apple-sauce, while a hot jam pie was hastily thrust into our little gourmet's skirt pocket, accompanied with the jocund query, 'There's for you! Isn't that what you're spelling for, you artful little baggage?'

'Oh, thank you, cook,' gleefully responded the young lady, 'how kind of you; you are better to me than any-body. However did you learn to make all these nice

things?'

'I learnt it all at home on the farm, ducksy, years and years before you were ever born or thought of. Now run along, and don't bother me any more to-day; it'll soon be dinner time, and I've got lots to do,' and cunning little Conny, agreeable to this enjoinder, would retreat noiselessly up the back stairs, the hot pie in her pocket burning her leg, and sneaking into the bathroom, would lock the door and abandon herself to the hasty delights of devouring that greasy-sugary morsel—all her very own.

But sometimes Miss Conny, seeking no abettor, would herself make a clandestine raid upon the comestibles. In the dusk of evening, or at the fag-end of a full meal, or upon hot afternoons, when her mother and her aunty were indulging in a siesta upstairs, and the cook was dozing in the kitchen, and the other children had been sent out for an airing, and the Susans and Mary-Janes were gossiping with Bobby or Grafton Budd, she would steal into the storeroom, and, mounting a chair, would secure a picking of all the good things reposing upon its shelves, getting down now and then in the midst of her voracities to listen for a possible footstep.

Such goings-on were certain to be found out at last; but it is sad to think that Miss Conny's wretched venalities should at length cause an estrangement between herself and her dear mamma, that could never be done away. Yet so it was, and this was the manner of it. One wintry afternoon our little insatiate, having noted the departure of Buttons upon an errand down town, and observing that the people of the house were mostly preoccupied, seized the opportunity for one of her epicurean forays. She betook herself to the larder, and sniffing around for a few moments, mounted a well-worn office-stool, which had been thrown in there out of the way. It had belonged to her father, and was a relic of his earlier period. Often had he rested him upon that shifty seat in years gone by, when, as a schoolmaster, rather than a 'principal,' he had taught in a learning-house before 'presiding over an academy.' Be assured, it was a time anterior to the gown and mortar-board, the silver ferule, and the M.C.P. Well, as I tell you, Conny got up on that shaky old stool, and searched for a particular savoury preparation, which her active nose informed her was lying in state on a shelf thereabout.

Our little maid was but a stumpy body, and that officestool, which had so failed to exalt her father long before, now also proved inadequate for the attainment of the coveted delicacy, which was still out of her reach upon the topmost shelf. So, dismounting, she rummaged out a box from a corner, and setting it upon the stool, clambered up again, when, presto! her nose and mouth came almost in contact with a splendid rich plum pudding, put there to

'ripen' previous to its final boiling for dinner.

Now, we all know what a risky thing it is to plant one's self suddenly in front of a great temptation, our powers of resistance not being duly prepared; and this was how it was with Conny, for her eyes glistened, her mouth watered, and her fingers quivered with excitement. She clutched that pudding with one hand, and the edge of the shelf with

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the other, and essayed getting down again to terra firma to render the captured sweetmeat a more particular attention.

Nervous and eager, she forgot the special combination upon which she had raised herself. It was growing dark; she took a hasty step downwards, missed her footing, and fell heavily to the floor, her combination falling on top of her. The pudding slipped out of her grasp, and flattened itself into a pulp at her feet, and, worst of all, her poor little ankle was sprained in falling, and began to hurt her so terribly that she could not suppress her cries.

Alas! you naughty, pilfering thing, you might have been sure your sins would find you out. . . Now you have

come to grief, and, doubtless, with perfect justice.

Yet, I pity you, poor girl, for your punishment will certainly be greater than your deserts. They didn't make you of the best material, nor turn you out of a faultless mould, so we mustn't expect too much of you. Nathless, you'll be the bravest of the brood some day, though your

life may be seamed with sorrow.

Meanwhile, you are making a great noise with your lamentations. You are arousing the slumbering spirits of the house. Yes, and here they come, too. They are galloping downstairs, they are rushing out of the parlour, they are racing through the kitchen, and hurrying in from the garden, attracted by the music of your screams. Your tremendous mamma, and your ponderous aunty, and your brawny brothers and sisters all; yes, here they come, in delighted consternation, and snorting loudly at the prospect of a rumpus. And Molly Buttox, forsooth, startled out of her catnaps by the surging crowd; the Susans and the Mary-Janes, too, giggling so impishly . . . and gardener Budd, and even Bobby, on the wings of the wind, back from his errand in the nick of time, to thrust his ubiquitous snout into the midst of the family brewage, . . .

'Ho! so we've caught you at last, have we, you little beauty?' shouted Mrs Fledger, as she sailed into the larder at the head of the column. 'Just look at that pudding! Sis. Why, she's mashed it into a jelly. You mischievous, thieving little wretch, you! What do you mean by it, eh? Get up, you ugly little cat, and don't lay howling there. Now we know who's been sneaking in here, picking and stealing. I'll punish you for this, miss,

you may depend. I'll make you remember it to the last day of your life. If there's anything I do hate upon God's earth it's a nasty, paltry thief. I don't know what you are, though I am your mother that says it; you don't take after me or any of my lot.'

'She favours the Fledgers, Essy,' chimed in Angeletta.
'Well, up you get!' sung out the mistress again, 'and

just you come along of me.'

The poor child tried to rise, but her ankle gave way under her, and she sank back to the floor in great distress.

'Oh, mother, I can't get up,' she moaned, 'I'm hurt so

dreadfully.'

'She's shamming, ma; don't you believe her,' chirped a favourite Fledglet.

"Fie for shame, fie for shame, Everybody'll know your name."

warbled another little fairy from behind.

'I think your daughter's hurt herself, mum, a-fallin' off o' that stool,' interposed the cook. 'I'll carry her upstairs, poor thing,' and the good woman pressed forward to lift

Conny up.

'There, never you mind about her,' sharply responded Mrs Fledger. 'Get along and scrape up that pudding, Mrs Buttox, and if there is any of it eatable, put it by for the maids. 'Now help me a bit, Sis.' The 'Sis' accordingly lent her assistance, and they lifted the suffering girl between them, and walked off with her through the kitchen, the youngsters buzzing round them, and the servants chattering in the background. 'Here, Bobby, hold up her skirts whilst we get her out of this dusty hole,' and the 'buttons' obeyed with malicious readiness.

'I say, Miss Conny, I can tell you something,' whispered the young imp, as they stumbled along the back passage amid the hubbub. 'You'll catch it to rights this time, and

I'm glad of it.'

Now when Conny was got upstairs, and dumped upon her bed, her mother and her aunty treated her to another tirade upon her wickedness, but as the delinquent only replied with moans and tears, it dawned upon the gentle twain that she might be seriously hurt. 'Well,' said her mother at length, 'leave off howling, and tell us what's the matter with you.'

'It's my foot, ma. Oh, it's my foot; I believe I've

broken it,' replied the weeping girl.

'Let's look and see then,' was the rejoinder, and they stripped off her shoe and stocking. 'You've sprained your ankle, that's what you've done!' exclaimed the mamma, 'and that's all the good you've got by your thieving, and a pretty nuisance you're going to be until it gets well again. You'd better have broke your leg. You're more trouble to me than all the others put together.'

Then, grudgingly, they bathed the injury, put her to bed, told her to 'hold her noise, for it was no use bellowing,'

and left her.

When Mr Fledger came in to his evening meal, after expounding to his 'young gentlemen' in the schoolroom, he noticed the absence of his first-born, and naturally enough, because the little damsel was accustomed to sit next to her father, so as to be near the fountainhead of supplies, where, unnoticed, amid the clatter and confusion, she could coax her papa for a 'nice piece of brown,' or some 'crackling,' or some 'kidney fat' (delicacies she doated upon). It is true she might have adopted the same tactics with her mamma, who dispensed the pies and puddings and sweetmeats, but she felt that any scheming in her direction would be useless, for her mother loved her not.

'Where's Conny?' inquired Mr Fledger, when they had

all settled themselves at the table.

'Upstairs in bed, and the best place for her, too,' responded the mistress.

'Why-how's that?' rejoined the master.

'Oh, she knows how it is, the little minx,' sharply replied his spouse. 'We caught her stealing a plum pudding off the top shelf of the pantry this afternoon. Just think of it, perched up on your old stool, and on boxes and things, and when she heard us coming she was in such a funk to get down that she fell and hurt herself, and serve her right; and as neither me nor Letty could stop her howls, we put her to bed out of the way. She's been at her tricks ever so long—a little thief. What's she going to be like when she grows up? That's what I want to know. I can't see why I was ever plagued with a child like that.'

'For shame, woman,' responded the principal; 'don't forget you're the child's mother.'

'Forget it! No, indeed. I'm not likely to forget that,

and I don't forget you're her father, neither.'

'Quite so,' rejoined our great man, trying to keep calm, although his good lady's retort gave him a nasty twinge; 'and I would have you remember, too, that if Conny, poor thing, isn't exactly a success, the fault is quite as much yours as it is mine.'

'Oh, I don't know about that,' clamoured the madam, her face empurpled by her wounded pride. 'Indeed, I doubt it very much; you men are such mighty lords of the creation that we women have very little to do with it. You know what I mean.'

This was a home-thrust at Horatio, with the very weapons he had flourished over his gentle spouse long before, and he felt the force of it, as the burning spots which started to his cheeks sufficiently testified. It was a repartee which left him at a loss for a rejoinder, and he could only look daggers at his wife across the table, while she returned his frowns with a leer of triumph.

'Well,' interposed Aunt Letty, 'it is useless to quarrel over it; besides, Mr Fledger, you know that Constance doesn't take after any of our family the least bit, and you

can't say she does.'

'Madam!' he vociferated, 'I can't say—that is, I choose not to say another word upon the subject, least of all will I discuss the matter with you.' Then, leaping to his feet and waving his hand over the table, he shouted, 'You can all get your suppers without me. I'm going to see what is the matter with Conny.' Then he pushed back his chair, and strode out of the room.

'Yes, we can get our suppers right enough without you-

you can go.'

'Pa, she's not hurt much, she's shamming,' were the kindly remarks which sped after him, as he slammed the door and marched upstairs to his poor neglected daughter, who was moaning under the bedclothes in her bare little room.

'Why, Constance, how's this?' asked the haughty-fronted principal, as he puffed himself up in hollow severity, and stood at the bedside, gazing at the muffled figure of his erring offspring, whose frowsy, black crown alone appeared above the tumbled coverlet. 'I hear you have been getting into sad disgrace, and I am sorely grieved that a child of mine should so far forget herself as to dodge about in a pantry to pilfer the eatables, as if she couldn't get enough to eat, forsooth. For shame, Conny. Tell me how it was you came to do such a thing?' At this harangue the child only sobbed bitterly, and rooted her head under the pillow. 'Come, now,' spoke the father, in a kinder tone, 'tell me all about it?'

'Father, I know I am a wicked, greedy thing, and I can't help it. You are all against me, every one of you, so I don't care what I do, or what becomes of me,' came at length in dolorous accents from under the pillow.

'Nonsense, child,' replied the master, 'you know very well I'm not against you; and as for your mother and the others, I'm inclined to think you're making too great a fuss about it.'

'No, pa, I'm not,' responded the little maid, suddenly sitting upright, and looking straight at her father through her tangled hair, which was hanging over her face like a 'I never do anything right for ma and aunty, and as for the others, they are making fun of me all the while, calling me an ugly little dwarf, and a Topsy, and all that sort of thing; and ma, she never gets me anything scarcely, and never takes me out with her. Just look what a figure She bought all the rest new things only last week, and there's nothing for me—there never is. I don't wonder I'm bad; it's enough to make anybody bad. No one's the least bit kind to me except cook, and she isn't always. Well, I don't care; when I get old enough I shall run away, for I'm not wanted here. I only wish I was a boy, I'd run away now. Oh, how my foot hurts me! Whatever shall I do?' and she burst into tears again.

The master was about to frame a reprimand, according to his usual style, in reply to this outburst, but while he looked at his little unfortunate, he couldn't help feeling the truthful significance of her words, child though she was. He began to realise the cruelty of her treatment, now that the facts were cumulated before him, and he tacitly acknowledged their danger and their shame. He knew that any attempt on his part to improve matters would be altogether

fruitless, so far as Conny's persecutors were concerned, and he was wise enough to see that this little soul was going astray through dearth of parental love and guidance, and he could only regard her inordinate appetite for the comestibles downstairs, as a first deplorable outcome of that otherwise starving condition in which the poor girl found herself, both affectionally and mentally—shut off, as she always was, from the joys and endearments of home. It was this, then, which had stultified her better part. It was this, doubtless, which had impelled her to seek a lower satisfaction wherever she could find it, no matter how paltry or how blamable it might happen to be. He saw it all now, and his conscience smote him when he remembered that he, too, though not actually one of her tormentors, had nevertheless condoned, as a thing to be expected, the hue and cry against her that was continually going on. Besides, had he not himself tacitly regarded her as a lusus natura, a living misfortune in his household?

Yes, indeed he had, and the thought was not an agreeable one.

Again he looked at the poor child, with critical eye, yet pitying heart. Yes, she was singularly unhandsome, even grotesque, as she sat there, upright in bed, unkempt, passionate and forlorn; still, was she not virtually unfriended, unchampioned, unwelcome in all that strident house? where, moreover, she had a perfect right to be, for was she not his own flesh and blood? and, indeed, were not her natal imperfections already a burden heavy enough for her young life to bear, without the infliction of any avoidable miseries, by the very authors of her humiliation?

He certainly thought so, and the reflection wrought a noticeable change in him. In a measure, he repented of his culpable unfatherliness, and would now endeavour to make her amends, even feeling ashamed that he had

delayed it so long.

'I have been so engrossed of late, Conny,' he ponderously began, 'with my scientific studies and engagements (he was anxious to give everything, in that connection, its proper weight); 'so absorbed with the numerous functions and obligations which necessarily devolve upon me, that I have not had time to accord this matter the attention it deserves.

'Ahem, I mean—that I have not taken sufficient notice of your little trials and grievances, lately. Now, of course, I can't be following your brothers and sisters, and—and the rest of them about the house continually, to see how they all treat you; I fear too, they are getting beyond my control, most of them, and—er—it won't do for me to be always in hot water with your mother and your aunt; there's enough of that already, and it never does any good, for they carry on just as they like, in spite of me. Still, I promise to take better care of you in future; you shall not be neglected and ridiculed in the way you have been, and I will see that you go to school, Conny, so as to get out of their way; and in the evenings, why, you can come and sit in my laboratory if you like, and I will explain my researches and experiments to you, and—and you shall be father's girl, so you shall,' added he, hurriedly and softly, as he noticed the big tears slowly gather in his child's eyes, and well over on to her cheeks, while she pushed back her dishevelled hair and gazed at him, half surprised and 'So there, be a good girl, and don't cry wholly grateful. any more,' he concluded, as he bent down and lightly kissed her bedabbled face.

Instantly she threw her arms round his neck, and her nervous little fingers seemed to hold him with the grip of a vise.

'Pa! oh, pa!' she cried, 'I know I have been very greedy and very wicked, but I will never steal anything again; no, not if I'm tempted ever so much; I never will, pa; then you'll love me, won't you? Kiss me once more,' she sobbed, still clinging to him. The master kissed her.

'There, there,' he muttered brokenly, 'lie down again and be a good girl, and don't cry, and I'll send for the doctor to look at your foot;' and he laid her back on the pillow, patted her head, pulled the bedcover modishly up to her chin and stepped out of the room; and as he closed the door behind him, his eyes filled with a quite unaccustomed moisture, for his inner sensories told him there was a being who actually loved him, a pleasant possibility he had never counted upon. Yes, it might be the love was crude, childish, tentative and not without selfish alloy; then, to be sure, it was only from funny, stumpy, little Conny; yet this child, without bidding or suggestion, had promised to forego

something, make a sacrifice, put a restraint upon herself for his sake, and that at least was a gracious sort of address to which he was an utter stranger.

Our principal had become inured to the oft-repeated requests of the junior members of his family, on the score of his affection; they had always plenty to ask for, but nothing ever to yield, and he failed not to perceive the wide distinction between Conny's affection and theirs.

As he went downstairs, he was conscious of a kind of vertigo of emotion that sprang him at his base; and a rosy glow, charmful, if fugacious, looked out from the pale, cold beacons which, for many a long year, had embounded his life.

A sad, sweet memory of long ago appealed to his heart, a memory of his childhood. There was sickness and suffering and all the misery of mute despair, though he had only felt it lightly, being but a little boy.

His mother lay a-dying, and he had been content to be kept mostly 'out of the way,' during the period of her illness.

But, at length, the last dread moment came, and they led him into the darkened room to say good-bye to her,—that sorrow-laden, cruel good-bye, which parts us from our mothers. In plaintive fear and wonder, he had gazed down at the thin, wan face, whose life-lights were flickered out. Still lingered there—the token of her battle-lost and won,—her spirit's fight against mortality.

Now, all was still. Her strife was merged in vanquishment. Dumbly she awaited the end, and it was quickly coming. Her poor, weak fingers sought her boy's face and twined about his neck, amidst his curly hair; and her shadow-stricken eyes looked their final, wistful tenderness into his dawning soul; and her bloodless lips moved in a tremulous whisper: 'Good-bye, Freddy, darling; kiss me; be a good boy, for your mother's sake, and think of her sometimes.' That was all. There only remained the clinging of the poor frail hands, that would not be parted from him till the nerveless fingers dropped—then someone released him and led him away, to look upon her face no more,—his childhood absolving him from the heavier-ruled ordinances of death, saving for the last, when his uncle had held him for a frightened moment beside her open grave.

Had he thought of that mother in all his after-time? had he felt the value of his mother's love? Had he remem-

bered her, and for her own dear sake?

These questionings disturbed him and he waived a reply. Yet he was strangely moved; at least, he had not forgotten her. Could it be that she was near him now? Perhaps she was—he could tell nothing about it, and—after all, these were strange flights and 'wouldn't pay the piper.' He must 'reckon himself up,' so he passed his hands through his hair and wrenched himself back again to convenient matter-of-fact.

When Mr Fledger got down into the business portion of his premises, he despatched the 'buttons' for Dr Smart, and when, in due course, that gentleman arrived, took him upstairs to see Conny. Upon examination the little patient's ankle was found to be badly sprained, whereupon it was given the needful treatment, and one of the Mary-Janes was detailed by Mr Fledger himself to attend to the invalid, until she was allowed to get about again, which was not until many weeks had passed. . . .

Now the things I have been telling you happened at a time considerably previous to our story, and during all the interval, there had been more or less friction between Miss Constance and her mamma.

Conny could never forget her mother's brutal treatment upon that pudding-pilfering, ankle-spraining occasion, and she recoiled from the Celestial presence as if she were a pillar of steel; or upon those occasions, and they were not seldom, when she came under her mother's ban or felt the grip of her coercion, the girl would assail her with passionate protests and would only yield after a storm of tearful re-proaches; and the fair Celestia, on her part, when she perceived that our young lady was encouraged in her outrageous conduct by her father's growing partiality, lost no chance whatever in showing her unqualified disapproval thereof. But when, a little later, the principal sent Conny to the 'young ladies' seminary' despite all objections and opposition, and furthermore, when it became apparent that, upon getting home of an evening, our newly-fledged Miss Fledger made a 'regular thing' of repairing to the laboratory, as soon as ever she could bolt her supper,—

why, Mrs Fledger declared to her sister, that 'to see the way that little minx was crawling round her father, was something sickening,' and our good lady seized every opportunity of showing her disgust at it, not only in her usual foreright, brutal manner, but with every instance of microscopic meanness, to which a woman of her parts can descend,—and you may be certain that whether as to clothing, food or treatment, the 'father's girl' was anything but the mother's girl, in every particular. Be assured that for her, at least, there was no redundance of fine raiment; no mollycoddle kindnesses; no luscious morsels between meals, nor sops at bed-time; no outings by day nor concerts by night; no gushing words of fondness; no coveted guerdons of love.

Still, for all those drawbacks and disabilities, the poor girl was nearer to happiness than she had ever been before. Though keen-witted, she was simple hearted, and possessed, moreover, a quiet spirit, and she soon grew enamoured of her exclusive life; her mental horizons were very limited, but she had the sense to see that nothing more extended

was open to her.

It was true she didn't make acquaintances amongst the young ladies at the seminary; being hardly ornamental enough to tally with their elegant tastes; but then, when it came to those evenings in the laboratory, she made famous friends with her father; kept his reading-lamp in the best of trim; dusted his slippers and put them on for him; listened to his fervid enunciations with extreme docility, with an earnest show of interest and a modicum of benefit, and did the patient and politic, looking-on part at all his experiments,—while searching out this thing or handing him that, from the haphazard jumble of his paraphernalia.

And when it grew late and the master was tired, she would sit on the arm of his elbow-chair and slide her arms round his neck, or slyly toy with his mutton-chop whiskers,

or his flowing and snaky locks.

By these little complaisances and others of a similar sort, she wound her tendrils about her father's heart, and at the time we are now approaching, had become the constant companion of his leisure hours and his faithful servitor in all things.

And so fearful was she of offending him, so keenly

mindful of that outer darkness that lay beyond the door of his laboratory, to which she deemed it possible any misdeed of hers might again consign her, that upon occasion, when she fervently desired anything at her father's hands, some trinket or unaccustomed indulgency, she would write out a neat little note to him in her best style, knowing that good penmanship always pleased the master, and, sealing and directing it with his name, qualifications, and residence complete, which covered the whole envelope, would lay it amongst the chemicals in the centre of his table, to be found by the principal in due course, when he came into his sanctum after supper.

Thereupon, he would cut open the envelope with his paperknife, not caring to damage the pleasing superscription and would smirkingly read the contents of that begging letter, while missy stood behind his arm-chair and watched

the facial symptoms her epistle was developing.

And afterwards, when in pompous magnanimity he would 'accede to her wishes,' which he usually did, she would spring out from her cover and caress him until his eyes watered, so that, to save his dignity, he was obliged to seek refuge in a most peremptory fit of studiousness.

'And so I may have it then, you dear old pa; how nice of you,' she would exclaim, kissing his solemn,—

ludicrous face again and again.

'Yes, yes,' he would reply. 'There, that'll do, little girl; now we are wasting the time, remember, and we must get to work. Fetch me that big jar, at the end of the second shelf, marked pyrophosphate of sodium, and set it down here gently. Then wash the ounce-glass, finishing off with distilled water; and see if you can measure me out two ounces of the solution exactly by the two-ounce mark, while I trim the spirit-lamp.'

And our little woman would choke down her effusions and proceed to, do with alacrity what her father had

bidden her.

Now, altogether, it will appear to you that this singular creature, though plainly inheriting many things from her parents, had developed other traits distinctively her own. Would it be reasonable to say that her peculiarities were the outcome of those clashing compounds in father and

mother which, mutually antagonistic, were first thrown together in that queer little vessel at the untoward moment of her inception? Or, otherwise that, harking back to some hoary eld-father, there had awakened within her a dormant atavism with the bygone life?

Poor little Conny, however this may have been, it is clear you came into your narrow world with the sorriest welcome, and it taught you quickly you were a mistake and a trespass. The while you set out plodding on your painful way, no ready hand held yours in sprightly fellowship; no comrade heart bespoke your budding sympathies. The hopes and joys of buoyant childhood—a wholesome pride, sweet-savoured self-esteem; these you might not claim. No precious thing was yielded you by grace of social charity.

What wonder, then, you sought you father's sheltering favours? Nursed his kindliness, and called it love. Contented you, while others looked askance, to earn the dear safety of his thanks and smiles. And a shabby recompense you found it, Constance, as will be sufficiently apparent; yet, nathless, when your life's lowly interlude shall die away, the All-Father will grant you a happy welcome in a brighter world.

CHAPTER IX

WOUNDS, BRUISES AND LINIMENTS

AND now, with suitable apologies for having left him so long, let us hurry back to the principal, hoping that our little discursion touching the character and doings of his daughter has given him a breathing time, not for the sighing away of his manly substance, but that he may drag himself up again out of that abyss of despair into which he had plunged after the rout in his lady's parlour.

Yes, Horatio, and should there be any doubt about your doing this, bethink you that a truly gallant soul such as yours, though we give it never so little encouragement, refuses to be loaded down, much less to be extinguished, by any calamity short of death; and that even then,

disruption supervening, darling Ego's lambent flame cannot willingly expire, for the huge, minute I Am, which is about to be swept off its earthly plane, like whisking a fly off the table, still holds fast to fancied greatness, and dreams of rising like a Phoenix from its own ashes to a larger I Am in a limitless world. Or should it nestle under cover of a Divine vindication, still essays to smuggle in its sorry bundle, its outworn trappings histrionic, dimly looking for a future somewhere, to strut forth again in masque and coif of fine importance.

Oh! I beseech you, then, dear master, whatever may befall, lose not the subtle selfhood of that irrefragable I.

However, we shall see.

'Well, Conny, and what do you want?' querulously demanded our preceptor as he stood and faced his little girl, who was timidly standing, as I have told you, in the doorway of his laboratory.

'May I come in, pa?' she asked him, doubtfully.

'Not just now, little girl, not just now,' was the reply. 'I have been horribly provoked, grossly insulted, in fact, and I think I ought to be alone at present,' he helplessly added, perceiving the compassionate look in his daughter's face.

'Oh, yes! I know you have,' she quickly rejoined, 'and it was so shameful. But never mind me, pa; you'll let me come in, won't you?' and she coaxingly advanced a step and closed the door behind her. 'I want to get away from ma; she's carrying on dreadfully again. For while she and aunty were flouncing about, sweeping up that mess in the parlour, they knocked down one of those big vases on the mantel-shelf between them—and smashed it all to pieces. And ma's in such a fury—it's just fearful to listen to her; and the children have all run up to the nursery, and the cook and the servants have locked themselves in the kitchen; and I stood on the stairs till I got frightened, and then I ran down to you; and, what's more, I nearly fell over that sneaky-Bobby, who was listening and sniggering all to himself in the back passage.'

The master groaned.

'And another thing too: I heard ma say that some of the birds were not spoilt, and she'll get a lot more and have 'em put in a new case like the one that's broken, only bigger; and she's going to get a new vase too, and you're to pay for everything—because you're at the bottom of it all."

There, that'll do, Conny; tell me no more,' broke in 'I have had enough of your mother for a the master. long time to come,' and he threw himself down in a heap in the hollow of his arm-chair. 'She has put me to shame before the whole school, and affronted my best young gentlemen besides; and that, too, in a manner inconceivably scandalous and disgraceful. I can't imagine how I am to recover myself, or claim the respect of my pupils any more,—things so essential to the maintenance of my academy. In fact,' he added, after a pause, in tones of unctuous sorrow, 'I see very plainly your mother means to be the ruin of me, in spite of all I can do.'

He was silent for quite a while; his head drooped upon his breast, and his fingers clutched spasmodically at the arms of his chair, while his harried thoughts reverted to the scenes of savagery in which he had just figured so principally and ignominiously, leaping afterwards to their inevitable consequences. He fancied he heard the gabble going on in his schoolroom, and all the smothered turmoil He saw there,—the whispered tales told by the sufferers. the eager, wondering faces of those 'young gentlemen' who imbibed the same, all sheltered behind slates and books, dexterously held up to hoodwink the teachers. His ears seemed to tingle with the covert uproar that wrestled with those teachers' flimsy control, bursting to break forth the moment school-hours were over. Already he felt the sting of his boys' quips and jibes one with the other, and all about him, as they frolicked out of the school, the day-scholars to carry home the story to their wondering parents, and the boarders to hold gleeful confabs together out in the playground and piquant tête-à-têtes up in the dormitory, upon the same villainous subject.

Then, in the gathering shades of the empty schoolroom, he fancied he could see his ushers draw close together mysteriously consulting, they the only ones who had not

yet learned the particulars of his disgrace.

Lastly, he pictured to himself a crowning agony like this: his lofty, lonely rostrum, with his vacant chair of state on high, and his outspread ample desk, so darkly grand—illumined now no longer with his brilliant presence, and lying there his silver sceptre too, no more upheld in dancing majesty—examinate, solitary, yet proudly sterling still. Ah! yes, poor Fledger's torture-quickened eyes saw all these things in vivid imagery, and he cowered in the cruelty of that fateful day and bitterly thought of the morrow.

He cast his bleary eyes round his narrow domain, over its walls and shelves, all blazoned with the pompous symbols and loaded with the properties of his cherished fancy; then up at the fume-stained ceiling and down upon the dirty floor. There lay his broken cane, the embodiment and presage of his woes, and he sickened at his cup of bitterness, it seemed so unbearably nauseous. As he clasped his hands to his throbbing temples, big, scalding tears of indignant shame forced their way out of his eyes. Oblivious of his daughter's presence, he jumped to his feet and, with arms outstretched, sent up a howl of despair to the dismal ceiling. 'That woman,' he gasped, 'that brutal woman is going to be the ruin of me. Oh! what shall I do? What am I to do?'

Now, Conny's sympathies were urgently moved by this frenzied spectacle, and, stealing up to her father, she tenderly took his hand.

'Sit down, pa, dear. Oh! do sit down,' she murmured,

'and let me try and comfort you.'

'Nonsense, child,' replied the master, with a tragedyring in his voice, 'it is altogether unseemly that you should be—er—poking about under my nose at a time like this. I request you to leave the room. Besides,' added he, with a show of better feeling, as he noticed his girl's eyes filling with tears, 'what on earth can you do for me, Conny, in a matter of this kind?'

'I know I can't do much for you, father,' said she; 'I only wish I could. But please don't be angry with me, and don't send me away, Perhaps I may be able to do something for you, some little thing; let me try. Besides, I do so want to be out of ma's way, she's in such a dreadful rage, and I know she's just aching to begin at me, like she always does when there's a row.'

For reply her father only groaned up at the ceiling again, stared distractedly round the room, and threw himself back into his arm-chair, limp and shapeless.

Now here was Conny's golden opportunity, and, with

true feminine instinct, she felt that it was; so, drawing closer to her father, she ventured to perch herself upon the arm of his chair and to put her hand into his. She was

not repulsed.

'I do think ma's a wicked woman,' said she, after a politic pause, 'always to be worrying you like this; but there, she can't let any of us alone two minutes together. I heard her bullying aunty like a pick-pocket about that vase, and I daresay she broke it herself, in her flings. I declare I thought she'd turn the very house out of windows. I'm sure we can't always go on like this; and then what'll it come to, I wonder?'

Mr Fledger made no reply, nor did he turn his head, but suffered his daughter to caress him as she had been doing

lately whenever vexations were rife.

This time, however, her affectionate handlings failed of their usual effect, for he lapsed into a brooding silence, and as he lay there, twisted into a heap, the heats of his excitement cooling off, he began to notice more sensibly his bodily aches and pains. His arms and shoulders were smarting with a dozen inflicted weals, the nape of his neck was stiff and sore, and his shirt collar was sticky and uncomfortable. Mechanically he put up a listless hand, groping about to adjust it. The collar was wet, and so was his neck. He looked at his fingers. They were smeared with blood.

'Why, pa, your neck's bleeding,' exclaimed Conny, as she caught sight of his hand. 'Why I do believe!'—she checked herself instinctively, and, glancing down at the crumpled cane lying there in the centre of the floor, realised for the first time the full significance of its shattered condition.

Her father was looking at it too, and together they saw that several of its splinters were streaked with blood. Then their eyes met. The colour had fled from Conny's face, and her lips quivered with indignation; but a dark flush had overspread the master's countenance, the veins stood out in his temples, and his scowling eyes revealed a depth of bitterness it would be hard to describe. His girl arose without a word and, tossing the broken cane into a corner, fetched a basin of water and a sponge from the chemical sink and bathed her father's neck.

For several minues there was mutual silence, Conny fearing to say anything lest she should open a flue for the principal's fires, and the master, on his part, consuming with an impotent fury he was striving not to exhibit along with the manifest absurdity of his present weaknesses. It seemed to him, besides, that his thunderings could be of no avail in the quiet of that laboratory; that if he held forth any more he would only get pity for his pains, and that too from his own child. Now he considered that he had been pitied by her too much already, and it made him feel extremely mean and uncomfortable. So he held himself in check by holding his tongue.

By-and-by, however, when Conny had finished with the wound on his neck, and had further anointed him with the kindly oil of her blandishments, our preceptor began to attain to a comparative serenity; and the silence becoming too patently absurd, he broke it by quietly remarking to

her while he feebly patted her head,—

'I shall sleep down here to-night, little girl. Can you get me a few bedclothes from the dormitory without—er—

any unnecessary fuss?'

'Of course I can, father, and I will,' she emphatically replied, resolving, however, to avoid the 'unnecessary fuss' by not going near the boys' quarters at all, and so escaping the 'young gentlemen's' ear-tingling inuendoes. No; she would bring down her own little bed and blankets, and would sleep that night on the mattress remaining to her, wrapping herself up in a rug without undressing.

The calm of evening was settling down upon the laboratory, and this would doubtless have disposed our master to a corresponding restfulness (for are we not all more or less the children of Nature?), had not a persistent gnawing at

his vitals admonished him that he was supperless.

It was altogether too bad, of course, that a 'noble Roman' like he, should be subject to a failing of this paltry kind; yet so it was, and he confided the fact to his daughter, and, indeed, confessed to her an unconquerable yearning for the fat things of his lower kingdom; sotto voce, he was beastly hungry.

'Hungry? I should think you must be, father,' responded his matter-of-fact little girl. 'I know I am. Ma and all the rest of 'em have golloped up their dinners long

ago, and it's all cleared away by this time. Well, never mind; I know what I'll do. It's past eight o'clock, isn't it, pa?'

Her father, glancing at his watch, replied that it was.

'Well, then, Susan must have done washing up, and Bobby's in the scullery, and cook's all by herself in the kitchen having her gin-and-water. I'll run down and tell her to make up a nice little supper for us, and I'll bring it up here myself while that Buttons is out of the way, so that he won't have anything to snigger about; then we'll lock the door and have it all to ourselves, shall us?'

The master acquiesced, and was duly bussed and fingered, and his little commissariat was just tripping away on her epicurean errand, when the prudent father, taking counsel with himself, concluded that there was something which had better be attended to touching the inexorable morrow, ere he yielded to the cravings of his physical man.

'Before you do anything, Conny, I should like to speak to the proctor,' advised the melancholy master. 'Go first, therefore, to Mr Ladlaw's room and tell him to come to me immediately.'

'Very well, pa,' replied his little lieutenant; and she went off about her business.

Our great man, now left to his own resources, arose, drew a side-table up to his chair, and, taking out of a cupboard in the corner a bundle of papers, which he had scribbled all over at various times with extracts and quotations, spread them forth in ostentatious disorder upon it, and, tumbling some books upon the floor around him, smoothed his face, tossed back his hair with his clammy paw, and, seating himself in a posture of studious abandon, quill-pen at his ear and inkstand at his elbow, awaited the coming of his principal teacher, trusting meanwhile that the departing daylight, while it left him to glow in his natural brightness, would fail not to cast a friendly obscurity over the seams and furrows of his recent perturbations.

In due time came a small, methodical tap at the door, and the 'proctor' was bidden to enter.

Mr Septimus Latimer Ladlaw was a tall, thin, painfully angular young man. His attire, so indicative of his caste, was of the long-tailed black and threadbare variety, while his linen, like his master's, was extensive and spotless.

The features of Mr Septimus were shiny-bony and formally classic, yet markedly wanting in beauty. His eyes were dark and bland, though lustreless as midnight, set in a fringe of black lashes, and overshadowed with a dusky pent-

house of straight and confluent brows.

Of a pallid and dirty lemon colour was his stony and passionless face, albeit a galaxy of freckles spotted it over, capered across the bridge of his ultra-Roman and cartilaginous nose, danced upon the broad, flat expanse of his forehead, and clambered amongst the roots of his raven hair.

By reason of the morning shave he was beardless, though

the lower half of his face had the hue of blacklead.

Thirty, was the age of this singular gentleman, though he looked much older, so passive-austere, so longitudinous was the cast of his countenance.

Nurtured amid 'nibs' and slate-pencils, copybooks, rulers and penholders, and dandled over a blackboard at his very birth, doubtless was he; and I venture to say that from his babyhood up he had weltered in arithmetics and grammars, burrowed among geographies and histories, and entangled

himself in the meshes of the lower mathematics.

The glowworm glister of a learning-house, I will never question, had always been his lucid day, while constantly, patiently, he droiled away his hours in measured rote, and eked out his tenuous life with dribs and husks and small mentalities. Had he ever unbent the rigid lines of those 'buccinators' of his, which from nose to jowl so dismally draped his face? Might he ever have misbehaved, or naughtily forgotten himself? Was it possible that he had ever laughed? Nay, but could he ever have even smiled? And, oh! had he wandered but once, for a single day, truant and timorous, out in the wholesome sunlight?

Verily, upon all these counts—I compute he never had. See him, then, this sad, mock-sapient wight, this chill and sapless fungoid — a creature mentorial, obsequent and automatous, consequential yet lugubrious - this was the

'proctor' of our school.

'I must ask you, Mr Ladlaw,' began the principal, fortifying himself with a hardy show of authority, 'to take the control of the academy to-morrow morning, possibly, too, in the afternoon; it's uncertain, and depends upon the progress of my work here,' tapping the papers on the table

with his knuckles. 'It will be proper to tell you that er—I am invited to deliver a course of lectures at Burton College, upon natural philosophy, chemistry and so forth. Now, of course, this shows a very kind appreciation of my abilities, but I really don't see how I shall be able to accede to their wishes,—my time being so engrossed with the academy. However, I shall go through the notes I have jotted down from time to time preparatory to my discourses upon former occasions, and if I find them complete enough, I may decide to spend a few days at Mancaster' (tap, tap, tapping with his finger on the table). 'It would entail a good deal of careful preparation, as the audiences there, although likely to consist very largely of my old and dear friends, many of them collaborators of mine, are nevertheless very critical-very-and-er-what is more, well qualified to criticise; so that—er—all things considered, whether I can find time to go into the matter in the proper way is very doubtful.'

Mr Ladlaw, in his secret depths, thought so too, although, as he stood up before the master as straight as a yard of pump-water, he was careful not to allow his wooden counte-

nance to give any token thereof.

Mr Fledger brayed into his handkerchief, cleared his throat and continued.—

'Now—er—Mr Ladlaw, do you feel equal to the responsibility of taking charge of my academy, should I be absent?'

'Well, yes, sir,' replied Septimus, putting one set of outspread fingers against the other; 'I think I do;' and his words seemed to issue from the bottom of a tub. 'I am no stranger to the duties that would devolve upon me, and

I would do my poor best.'

'Exactly so,' was the rejoinder; 'and that leaves me little more to say at present; just this, however: upon entering the schoolroom to-morrow morning, you will explain the matter of the lectures to our young gentleman, and—er—pro formā, you had better take my place on the platform and open school with prayer, as usual, ex cathedrā. The prayer-book you should find in the top right-hand pigeon-hole as you sit at my desk; and I needn't tell you to conduct everything with proper decorum. Then go the rounds of the school, giving the necessary rewards and impositions. Call up my class and do the best you can with it, confining yourself strictly to your duties, and don't permit the young

gentlemen to engage you in any conversation relative to er—matters in the house; and when you dismiss school at twelve o'clock, come to me again and I may give you further instructions. That's all, I think, Mr Ladlaw; you comprehend, I presume?'

'I think so, sir.'

'Very well then, you can go,' concluded the master.

'Good-evening, Mr Fledger.'

'Good-evening, Mr Ladlaw. Oh! by the bye—before you retire to-night, tell Mr Quelch and Mr Sheepshead that I shall be absent to-morrow morning, and give them a few discreet words of explanation; and—let me see; there was something else. Oh! I have it; be good enough to fetch me my silver ruler; I left it upon my desk, this afternoon.'

'Certainly, sir,' was the proctor's sepulchral reply—and turning on his heel, he noiselessly departed; the door-latch clicked minutely behind him and Frederick, our Horatio, was alone again; and as he bundled his papers and books back into the cupboard, he quietly smirked—to think how cleverly he was acquitting himself, at the very moment, as it were, of his stunning reverses.

Nor, indeed, should we grudge him his due congratulations, for it was plain, after all, that our redoubtable friend's gallinaceous spirit had not succumbed to misfortune, but

was alive and rampant, in spite of everything.

Yes, Fledger, you have convinced us all, that you are a game bird still,—even though your comb has been roughly clipped; and this being so, it was a pity you were so hasty in removing your scientifical properties, before the return of Mr Ladlaw, who, ferule in hand, rapped at your door, the moment after you had made that clean sweep of your table; and although it is true that, with your usual gallantry, you endeavoured to retrieve matters, by making a dash at the door, that you might open it only the inch or two necessary for the passing in of your trophy, you were hardly rapid enough, Fledge—hardly rapid enough—for the handle of that door turned before you could grasp it and lo! the prominent beak of your Septimus entered the room in advance of the proffered ferule, and those bland and passionless eyes, planted on each side of that beak, took in the altered condition of things, instanter.

Well, there, it couldn't be helped; so snatching your

coveted plaything, without thanks or parley, you jammed the door to with such vehemence that the dumfounded Ladlaw should have lost every impression then and there but one of astonishment at the manner of his dismissal; very likely he did; and this was what you hoped, Frederick, as you went back to your seat, and sniffed for your supper. . . .

Well, well, take it for all in all, you have done splendidly, my master. You have blown out a beautiful windbag, but then, how will it behave itself on the morrow? Ah! how will it bear the buffetings of the storm to come?

Pending a reply to these anxious inquiries, let me give you a few particulars as to Conny's little supper, and the secret and slumbrous proceedings which followed it.

She had brought in a tea-tray, bundled up in plenty of tablecloth which, being unfolded, revealed quite a medley of comestibles.

Let me see: nestling together in the same dish—were a cold fowl, some luke-warm potatoes, and a head of celery. A plate of hot muffins was planted upon a cold jam-tart. A bottle of Burton ale and a couple of crumpled napkins hobnobbed together in a dish of cold mutton. A little brown teapot poked its nose into an open jar of Dundee marmalade, and a glass of jelly and a chunk of cheese squatted in the butter dish; while cups and saucers, knives and forks, jingled on the circumscribed board.

Our little housewife lit the master's lamp, and locking the door and spreading out this repast upon the table, invited her father to 'fall to.' So with mutual goodwill and voracious alacrity they set to work, filling up the voids in their famished stomachs,—no unnecessary verbiage between them, for their jaws were wagging to a different music.

Still, what remarks they did make were to the point. 'You take the breast, father, and give me the legs.'

'Very well, there you are; mind you don't drop it out of

your lap. Hand me the salt, Conny.

'These potatoes are as cold as ice. . . . Mind how you draw that cork, little girl; better let me do it. Ha! I thought so; there it goes all over the floor.'

'Well, I couldn't help it, pa. Drink it up before it's

half wasted. Have some pie, father?'

'Well, I don't care if I do.'

'Jelly?'

'No, you little sweet-tooth, you may have it all to yourself.'

'More tea, pa?'

'Yes, child, and fill up the cup. Just hand me that celery. I am all smothered up in this old chair. Why didn't the cook toast this bread, I wonder?'

'Oh! look at the jumpers in your cheese, pa.'

'Never mind, little girl, they'll all go the same way.'

'Here's a clean knife.'

'No, no, I don't want a knife for these muffins, fingers 'll do.' And it was munch, crunch, slobber, guzzle, globber, cham, cham, gulp, gulp, smack, smack, smack, with father and daughter, one against the other, and both against time, until their delicate comessation was finished, a matter of twenty minutes or so, and much credit to them, I will say, considering the vast amount of provender they tucked away in the time.

'There! I feel all the better for that, don't you, pa?' remarked our young lady, with a last smack of the lips, as she gathered the remains of their feast into a heap and

dumped them into a corner.

'Yes, indeed,' replied the principal, as he flipped the crumbs off his hams with his pocket handkerchief. 'Indeed I do, and I'm afraid, Conny, we're all very poor creatures, if—er—we are deprived of our proper sustentations. Ahem, h'm,' and he threw himself back and picked his teeth.

It has been shrewdly remarked that the social status of people is best discovered by observing their methods at meal-times, and, if this be true, you will agree with me that the standing of the Fledgers was not of the highest. . . .

Well, their repast was finished. Nature's cravings had been appeased, and they sat together for a time in quiet

confab, this father and daughter.

The man, belolling him there in a brief fool's paradise, engendered by the goodly fumes of his supper, his sallow face blotched and turbid from the bilious humours fermenting within him, his daughter's fingers playing round his head. Presumption, weak ambition, pompous makebelieve sprawled nakedly upon his flaccid countenance. His weakly underchap was wet and contumacious, his hazy eyes confronted empty space.

But the girl beside him, although she was moulded in

whimsied counterpart of her father, still showed no taint of the master's self-assertive vanity. Patience, courage, tenderness, self-denial—lay germinant behind her simple animality; they stirred within her eyes a vague and flittering beauty; they lent the harmonies of helpful love to her incongruous features, and pledged her, for the coming time, to outstrive the urgings of that grosser part which masked and marred her gentle spirit. . . .

But it was growing late, and the principal signified his great desire to court repose. So Conny unwound her arms from her father's neck and bestirred herself in the promised

preparations.

Noiselessly she sought her own little room, lit a 'night-light,' dismantled her bed, and silently wended her way back to the 'laboratory' under a heap of blankets and sheets.

Soon she had arranged the master's lowly couch by making his bed on the floor, then she tilted the arm-chair on its back and drew it alongside 'to keep the draught away,' kissed him good-night, and stole off like a mouse to her bedroom, where, lying down on the bare mattress, she swaddled herself up in her petticoats and slept the sleep of the righteous until daybreak.

CHAPTER X

A METEOR FROM THE NORTH

WALTONBURY Town was a secluded old place, hidden away, as I have shown you, in the centre of a quiet, agricultural country. A district which lay completely apart from the busy roads of travel and the trunk lines of railways.

It was an old-world region of winding lanes and hedgerows, secluded woods and bosky dells, breezy hills and billowy fields, flowery meadows and placid streams. 'Twas a little land of wooing loveliness, typically, delightfully English,—and yet its pleasant places were rarely visited:—its sheltered hamlets and ivy-covered churches, and its fine old mansions, seated so proudly within their heavily-timbered parks, where the crowding ferns stood you breast

high and the fallow deer browsed and gambolled in and out amongst the sweeping foliage.

How few in all the great Metropolis had ever known the sweetness of its summer airs. How few had ever sallied forth into those fair wealds and wolds, at scented dawn, from nestling farmhouse or village inn, to greet the golden sunrise upon the open heath—and watch the lingering mistwreaths curl up from hill and dale, to melt, return, and float away till every crested knoll and drowsy mead, each bank of heaped-up massive greenery—cast off its grey vestments of the night, flushed a warm welcome to the mounting sun, then revelled altogether in the gladness of the morning.

How little heeded were the subtle charms and buoyant beauties of the spring-time there: its silvery skies and happy songsters—the thrush, the wren, the blackbird and the soaring lark—its cowslips, daffodils and fragrant violets too; its starlike primroses, spread out in vivid clusters everywhere under the filtered sunlight of the emerald-tinted woods, while the fruit-trees were bursting into snowy blossom in all the sheltered vales around.

And what ken had anyone of its later glories, when all the air was joyous with the honeyed breath of 'happy, hot hay-making time,' when the evenings had grown soft and clear, and the lengthening twilight lingered out with the cuckoo's plaintive call, till lonely, minstrel nightingale, in soulful harmonies, took up the legend of the finished day and poured forth his music to the mellow darkness. . . .

No place was this wherein to court renown or whet the restless soul for tall ambitions.

How came it then that our soaring cock-bird, Fledger, after searching presumably the nation over—for a spot that should merit the flow of his great attainments; how came it that he chose at last to settle down on insufficient, unresponsive Waltonbury, and consented to waste his brilliant life in a neighbourhood so inconsequently beautiful, in a town so patently obscure?

Did he think that his crowings would call away the plough-boy from those verdant solitudes and emulate his father Hodge to study a lexicon o' nights? Impossible!

Then did he affect the pastoral life, or love the country for its own sweet sake?

Oh! no. Our preceptor's tastes trended not at all in

those directions. His footfall never sought its bowery lanes, nor did the underbush snap beneath his condescending tread in hazel grove or thicket. Nor ever exploited he the summits of its wooded hills and unkempt, rugged heaths, unless it were to enact some showy out-of-doors' parade or elaborate a flourish in the midst of his boys, with science for his watchword—entymology, botany or astronomy, forsooth.

Now, as against all this, you might suppose that our principal would have planted himself a little nearer than Waltonbury was, to his beloved college at Mancaster; closer to the scenes of his earlier triumphs and frequent proud allusions, so that he might, in some sort, continue that old, delightful interchange of thought and feeling with those professors—his co-labourers there. Or that, in any case, he would have invited them to visit him at his academy sometimes, if only for old acquaintance's sake; and it is true that he often credited himself to others with doing so, with having done so, with being about to do so, yet in point of fact—he never did. What hermit-like self-sufficiency this was, to be sure.

But then we must remember these distinguished people all do singular things, and I verily believe that our great Frederick would have lain *perdu* at Waltonbury for the whole remaining term of his natural life, so far as his friends at Mancaster were concerned, had not the unexpected unexpectedly come to pass, which it sometimes does, albeit very seldom. Let me explain.

Late in the evening of that memorable day which I dwelt upon in my last chapter, an elderly and portly gentleman from the North arrived at a big old house in the outskirts of Waltonbury. He had broken his journey up to town that he might visit a sister—a lady who, about a year before, had lost her husband, a 'city man.' Her bereavement had left her in delicate health and straightened circumstances, and she had resolved to retire into the country, while her children were growing up, choosing some healthful place which should not be too remote from the Metropolis. She had happened upon this house at Waltonbury, and had moved into it with her family some time before.

Now this lady's name was Aldermaston, and her visitor,

if it please you, was no less a personage than Henry Hartram Bolderlash, D.C.L., Professor of Physiology,

Anatomy, etc., of Burton College, Mancaster.

After the first greetings between brother and sister, the professor had been taken up to his room, along with his wraps, rugs, dressing-case, gold-headed cane and silver-mounted unbrella. There he had bustled about for a few minutes, and had hurried downstairs again into the dining-room to have a little talk with his sister before retiring to rest.

Dr Bolderlash was a fine-looking gentleman, both as to face and form. He had clear-cut, handsome features, an honest, shrewd and fearless countenance, blue-grey eyes that were bright and keen, a massive brow and a profusion of wavy-curly, iron-grey hair that was so silky and well kept that it added very much to his attractive appearance.

The doctor was clean shaven, and his strong and earnest face was uniformly and pleasantly pink. His broadcloth was of the first quality, and his linen faultlessly white, although somewhat tumbled by the lollopings of travel. A pair of gold-rimmed eyeglasses reposed upon his low-cut, well-filled waistcoat, and rose and fell with the deep and measured suspirations upheaving beneath it, thus affording an elegant register of his orderly—natural activities. The whole man was visibly staunch and trim, genial, proud and Anglo-Saxon.

Mrs Aldermaston seated herself beside her brother. She was a slender woman of dark complexion, with only a trace of likeness to the professor, and presented a striking contrast to the robust and intelligent gentleman beside her, whose lines, judging by appearances, had fallen uniformly in pleasant places. Her bearing was stately and tender.

'Well, Matilda,' began the professor, 'I'm glad to see you again. Why, it must be four years since we last met,

and that was at your place at Twickenham.'

'Oh, never speak of those times, Henry,' enjoined the lady; 'I was so happy then, so completely happy. And now! Think of how I have suffered and lost, and all within the last eighteen months.'

'Yes, Tilly, I know,' replied the brother, with much feeling, laying his large, warm hand over the thin, folded fingers in her lap. 'But you must cheer up and try to

make the best of it. Life is full of misfortunes, and trouble comes to us all, I suppose, sooner or later;' and he looked down at his slippers, wondering what his great trouble would eventually be. 'But then,' he continued, remembering to comfort her, 'you have your children about you, Tilly, and a competence, too, sufficient for your reasonable needs, so that you haven't to fight the world, and that's a consolation; you have, besides, saved the household gods,' casting a glance around him at the well-appointed 'It might have been worse, Tilly, much dining-room. worse,' he continued, stroking her hands affectionately. 'And now tell me how you are getting along here, won't you? Just a summary to stay my curiosity before we go to How are the children; what are you all doing? And how do you manage to live in this out-of-the-way place?'

His sister smiled faintly. Well, Henry, I haven't much to tell you. I have felt stronger since I came here, and we like the neighbourhood, only there's Leonard's schooling; that worries me a good deal just now. You

know I had expected-'

'Leonard's schooling,' interrupted the professor, 'what's the matter with that? You wrote me there was a large collegiate school here, Leonard could go to, and didn't

you send him to it, after all?'

'Oh, yes. But I'm afraid he's doing very little good there. Why, you can't imagine what a queer lot they are up at that academy; the master may be very well for rudimentary teaching, but I don't believe he's competent to instruct the elder boys, although he makes a great parade of his learning.

'But what I object to more than anything—is his turbulent and brutal wife who, Leonard tells me, does just what she likes with the master, and there's a sister of hers who is nearly as bad. Leonard has told me some lively things about them lately, but the tale he brought home this after-

noon seems almost incredible.

'It appears that the master and his boys, and this wife of his, and her sister, had a free fight in their parlour to-day. The women got the upper hand, thrashed the boys all round, and broke the cane over the master's back. Leonard came in for his share of it, and showed such a threatening temper that he quite frightened me. This evening, three of his school-fellows called here by appointment, and I knew by their remarks that they were brewing mischief.

'So I made it my business to go and see the other boys' parents, and when I got to Braddington's, they were all there, and talking over the scandalous proceedings at the academy. We had a long consultation, and concluded the best thing for us to do was to take our boys away from the school.

'I had just written a note to the master when you arrived. It's very unfortunate, but Leonard admits himself—that he's making no progress in his studies, because the master can't teach him anything. So he shall come away, though where I'm to send him now, I'm sure I don't know.'

'Goodness, Matilda,' replied the doctor, 'I'm sorry it's come to that. It will be difficult to place the boy suitably, while you live here, especially if you wish to keep him under your apron-strings, and I suppose you do. But tell me more about this pedagogue and his academy; perhaps I may be able to adjust matters in the morning. I know what boys are when they take a thing into their heads.'

'As to the school, Henry,' Mrs Aldermaston replied, 'I don't think anybody would be likely to miss *that*. It stands across the top of High-Street, and there's a board stuck above the roof that you can read two miles out of town.

'The master's a singular looking man; so absurdly singular that, when I first called upon him about Leonard, it was all I could do to keep myself from laughing in his face, though I wasn't in a laughing mood. But, what with his long, hooky nose and ridiculous mouth, his queer little legs, and his pompous ways, I did think he was one of the most nonsensical men I ever set eyes upon.

'I've been to his lectures since, and grown a little accustomed to him. He always cuts a great figure marching down to the Abbey at the head of his school, Sunday mornings, dressed up in his college things.'

Dr Bolderlash had straightened up while listening to this recital, and by the time it was concluded, he was as rigid as a note of exclamation. 'Why! why! what's the man's name?' cried he, with his hands pressed down, grasping the arms of his chair, while he looked his sister in the face.

'His name is Fledger, Horatio Fledger, I think, with a lot of initials behind it. He used to be a professor at Burton College, so possibly you know something about him?

'Why, dash my wigs! I thought so,' shouted the doctor, slapping his thigh and jumping to his feet. 'Why, know the fellow, ha, ha, ha-a! know him, of course I do. A professor at Burton's, was he? Ha, ha, ha-a! why, he must be the biggest humbug alive.

'Now let me tell you, Tilly,' sitting down again, and lurching his chair round sharply so as to face his sister, 'This Fledger used to keep a little cubby-hole of a place, half shop, half bookstall, close to the college. That must

be, oh! that must be nigh upon twenty years ago.

'I don't know where the chap sprang from, and he was seedy, ignorant and absurd, but he seemed to have plenty of cheek, and somehow he got permission to sell the college publications—reports, lectures, and so forth. There was a regular bookseller for that, of course, on the opposite side of the way, but this Freddy, as we used to call him—I never heard that his name was Horatio, and I don't believe it is—edged himself into the business somehow. I don't know how, but he did.

'It used to amuse us all to see his airs and graces, his long tail-coats and his white chokers, after he began to feel his feet. You couldn't have persuaded that man that his little shop and his little self were not the most important part of the college. Whenever he could find time to escape from his den, he would be bustling about the buildings, cropping up here, there and everywhere, button-holing everybody upon some pretext or other, trying to get chummy with the class-men, and never letting an opportunity slip for a chat with the professors.

'Now I come to think of it, too, he was a very good penman, and fond of labelling his little shop all over with

flourishy notices, so as to show off his handiwork.

'He used to write visiting-cards for some of our young men, and I am not sure I didn't give him an order in that

line myself.

'The fellow went on for a couple of years in this style, until he got so bumptious we had to take him down a peg or two; in fact, we snubbed him pretty badly. His business fell away and he had to depart, which he did quite suddenly, leaving his books behind him. Then his landlord sold out

everything in the place for the rent, and we never saw Freddy any more. Where he went to none of us knew, and nobody cared, and I suppose I'm one of the very few at Burton's now, who could remember anything about him, and to think that he should crop up again, after all, in this fashion.'

The professor paused, gazing steadfastly at his sister, and a whimsical expression came into his face. 'Well,' said he at last, slapping his thigh again and running his hand down to his knee, 'I must go and look up this splendid gentleman, this Horatio, as he calls himself, to-morrow morning. I must, and have a little talk with him, the very first thing I do. Go with me, Matilda?'

'No thank you,' was the lady's reply.

'Good-night then, little sister, pleasant dreams to you,' and Henry Hartram Bolderlash, handsome, free and masterful, tossed off his cold brandy and water, crunched a biscuit, lit his candle, and with heavy, yet elastic step, hied him upstairs to his bed-chamber.

CHAPTER XI

AN AFTERMATH

THE morning broke. The winds were awakening. Black clouds scudded across an angry sky, and big, premontory drops of rain drummed on the window of Dr Bolderlash's bedroom, while that potent and worthy gentleman stood at the dressing-table and shaved himself.

I won't trouble you with the particulars of the doctor's toilet, which, though simple, was very perfect in its way,—our professor being an adept in the nice logic of personal appearances, and I merely introduce him in this premature manner and preparative condition, to show you how indifferent men of his stamp can be to the significant portents of a trouble—they themselves are about to evoke; and should he upset the salt at his sister's breakfast-table, or find himself dodging a black cat, while hastening up the High Street to Waltonbury House Academy, we may believe that

he would still dare everything, still hold himself insensible to those tokens of approaching discomfort.

However, the doctor knows very well he is going to be on the safe side of any disturbance, and is proudly conscious of his purchase and prerogative therein.

But let us return to the house of Fledger.

The grey, unwelcome glimmer of coming day crept in through the diamond panes of our principal's laboratory window; it stole over the master's upturned nose, and under his half-closed eyelids, as he lay upon his back on his comfortless bed. He had worn out the night in fitful slumberings, harassed with malignant dreams, and his aching hips were wrung by his uneasy twistings on that hard wood floor which had served him in place of a spring-mattress.

He yawned and blinked, rubbed his eyes and sat up, though he greeted not the coming of another day. Then he drew his shanks under him to keep himself upright, and

gazed out into the murky atmosphere.

Black patches of progroostic nimbus careered across the leaden sky, beating a dull and watery tattoo upon the window as they swept along,—the sullen promise of a cataclysm to come; while a big, black crow, just then, cawed mournfully in mid-air as he sailed over the house of Waltonbury.

Now, our valiant Fledger, unlike the doctor, was not proof against beldam superstitions, so he turned his face away and shuddered from head to foot, just as if you had

thrust a nasty bolus down his throat.

His lowly resting-place tempted him no longer. He arose and dressed himself, and sitting down at his table, doggedly munched a frugal breakfast which his faithful handmaiden, Conny, had smuggled into him.

Let us leave him a quiet hour for that repast, especially as he will find the remainder of the day singularly lacking

in serenity. . . .

Ratatat-tat-atat-tat! Jangle, ingle, jingle!

After this manner, with knocker and bell-pull, did an early visitor herald himself through the halls and courts of Waltonbury House.

Bobby Buttons was stumbling down the back stairs under a load of 'dirty things' from the 'dormitory,' when this imperative summons assailed his ears. An unfriendly bootjack and several old shoes—sent hurling after him by the 'young gentlemen' above, had inspired him with an anxious desire to reach the bottom of those stairs as soon as he could. It was not surprising, therefore, that the clangour at the street-door just at that moment, should have augmented his speed so materially that he lost his nerve, got entangled in his impedimenta, took a false step and rolled heels over head to the bottom, clouts and all. However, he wasn't hurt, so he picked himself up and was proceeding to gather up the 'dirty things,' also—encouraged thereto by the mocking laughter of those upper angels who had witnessed his rapid descent, when—

Ratatat-tat-tat! Jangle-ingle-jangle! resounded through the house again, that imperative sesame from an unflinching hand. Buttons now bolted to the kitchen, hastily to perform his prescribed toilet. He scratched the dirty comb through his dirtier hair and whipped on his livery with such exceeding celerity that, being a growing lad and the jacket altogether too small for him, he ripped it open down the back from top to bottom. Still, nothing daunted by a trifle of that kind, he scampered off to the street-door, buttoning up in front while bursting open behind, and urged on by the rousing thunders that now opened upon him from the first-floor landing. 'Bob, you young devil, why don't you open that door? I'll warm your hide for you, if I come down.'

Well, Bobby got to the door, tinkered with its fastenings, and threw it wide open. There stood Dr Henry Hartram Bolderlash in all his grandeur, clad in a voluminous mackintosh, with silver-mounted umbrella expanded over his head, the rain pelting down upon him and his.

'Is your master?—ha, ha—very good—upon my word,' he chuckled in self-interruption, as he noted the singular points of the young jackanapes who stood before him. 'Is Mr Fledger at home?' resumed the doctor, stoutly.

'Yes, sir,' was the reply.

'Then tell him there's a gentleman wishes to see him immediately.'

'Certainly, sir,' replied the buttons. 'Will you walk in, sir?'

Our professor stepped over the threshold. The doormat had been snatched away to get its usual morning bashing in the backyard, so the visitor stood where the mat ought to have been, and dripped a pool of turbid water around him from umbrella and mackintosh. Yes, dripped it on Mrs Fledger's spick-and-span oilcloth—laid down in the hall, and with shameless indifference too. Meanwhile, buttons capered off to his master in the 'laboratory,' affording the professor, as he did so, an admirable view of that slit in the back of his jacket, and of his torn and dirty shirt which, like a flower-bud bursting from its calix, puffed out from underneath it,—itself disclosing, in its turn, an inner bloom of pinky buffness—which was the skin of master Bobby's back. 'Ah, capital, by jove!' again chuckled the doctor, as he got a full view of that blush-rose of raggedness blossoming upon Bobby's hinder parts.

'Yes, capital, that it is. I'm going to have some fun

here, I can tell. I wonder what comes next?'

The words had hardly passed out of his mouth, when he caught sight of Mr Fledger's gown and mortar-board, hanging upon the antlers on the wall. 'By Jove, that's better still; that's grand!' ejaculated the doctor, and he laughed aloud in the empty hall; not knowing, but there, I don't think he would have cared if he had known, that a pair of large, uncomely faces stared down upon him from the obscurity over the balusters, frowned at the mess he was making on the oilcloth, and scowled savagely at his uncomplimentary remarks. But as our much-amused professor began now to look around him, and even above him, for some further outstriving of the master's mind, those faces silently melted away into the hallowed depths of the front bedroom. . . .

'There's a gentleman wants to speak to you, sir,' said Bobby to his master, as he poked his visage in at the 'laboratory' door.

Mr Fledger started when he heard this intelligence. He had been ruminating over the remains of his breakfast, and he now pushed the tea-tray away from him with an angry gesture. He had taken the trouble to arrange matters with Mr Ladlaw the evening before, as I have shown you, so that he might save himself from all interruption that morning,—wishing to have a time for deliberation as to how it would be best to comport himself under the Argus eyes of

his 'young gentlemen,' when he should walk into his school-room next time.

There was no escape from that unpleasant performance, and all unfortified as he knew himself to be, he felt the necessity of this brief respite to 'reckon himself up,' and man of resources that he was, to choose him for the occasion, some protective panoply of superior magnificence.

'A gentleman to see me, at this time of the morning, and in such a downpour? Nonsense!' the master exclaimed, 'some half-starved teacher, I suppose, begging for a place.

What's his name?'

'I don't know, sir; he didn't say,' replied the buttons.

'Well, haven't I told you a thousand times not to come pestering me until you get these people's names, and what they want? Go and tell him to call another time; I'm too busy to see him to-day,' and he caught up a book upon parlour chemistry, while Bobby smirked and departed.

But buttons was back again in a few moments, under his master's nose and full of quiet glee, as he always was when he had a pretext for insinuating himself anywhere

that he wasn't wanted.

'Here's the gentleman's card, sir, and he says I'm to be sure and tell you that he mustn't be put off; he's going up to London by the next train, so he can't call again.'

Mr Fledger snatched the proffered card from Bobby's

grimy fingers, held it up to the window, and read,-

HENRY HARTRAM BOLDERLASH, D.C.L. Burton College, Mancaster.

And it was pitiful to behold the abrupt change that came over our poor master. A ghostly pallor overspread his countenance, and his lips twitched and trembled. He started to speak. 'Ah! I see,' then dropped the card on the table and took a few turns about the room to recover his balance.

Bringing up at the table again, he proceeded to blow his nose with much thoroughness and persistence, then picking up the card, he looked at it helplessly for a few seconds,—Bobby's relish for the niceties of the situation now becoming abominably apparent to him.

'Tell Professor Bolderlash,' at length essayed the master, grandly, 'that—er—have you shown him in the parlour?'

'No, sir,' was the reply.

'Zounds! then go and do so directly, sir. Stop a moment. Tell the gentleman, I mean—ask the gentleman to be kind enough to wait a few minutes and I will be with him very shortly. Why, you young devilskin, what are you grinning at? don't you understand me?'

'Yes, sir, in course I do,' said the young imp, 'but you've just wiped your nose on your napkin, sir;' and he pointed

a dirty finger at the master's coat-tails.

Mr Fledger groped behind him, pulled out the ill-used napkin and tossed it among the breakfast things, then taking refuge in a burst of fury—

'Now, sir!' he roared, 'will you leave off sniggering there like a fool, and go and do as I tell you, or shall I box your

ears?

'No, sir, in course I will, sir,' responded the imperturbable Bobby, and grinning impudently at our hapless preceptor to the very last, he hastily escaped. . . .

'Shown in' to the prize parlour a few moments later, and left alone there, Professor Bolderlash found himself under no necessity to search for fresh amusement, although it was the fair Celestia's works and ways which now claimed his attention.

It is true that our worthy gentleman winced a little at that flame-coloured carpet, and was somewhat dazed by the dancing roses which festooned the walls around him.

Walking, however, to the centre of the spacious chamber, and taking a circling view of its contents, he quickly realised all the humour of the thing, and bestowing his stately avoirdupois tenderly upon the staunchest seat he could find, which was an article of only comparative solidity, he threw himself back to make a more leisurely survey of the beauties around him, while his little chair creaked and groaned in dangerous protestation. 'A-a-h,' he soliloquised, 'now this is what I do call recherché, and nice — beautiful,' as his eyes roamed around, 'that it is. What a merry entertainment these people are giving me. This has been a fine old place, though,' he mused, throwing back his head, and gazing up at the carved oak ceiling, and afterwards, at the heavy wainscotting, and the great marble mantel so quaint and stately—with its brazen fire-dogs, and its ample hearth.

Then he began to laugh again, as he noted each separate and added enormity,—the ridiculous little turtle-like fender, the tawdry miniature hearthrug, the upstart puny furniture, and the paltry gewgaws, wax-flowers, dried grasses, and feather ornaments, and as he smiled, he doubted not that these were the flourishes of a feminine hand.

Mr Fledger prepared to meet his visitor. He would have preferred to retreat, had escape been possible. But he knew that he was cornered, and must stand up to the encounter. A piece of looking-glass was fastened to the wall; it had served him upon other occasions, in a make-shift way, and he glanced therein at his unlovely image, and saw, at once, that his external unfitness sufficiently matched his heartfelt disabilities. His face and hands were dirty; his shirt in front, gave evidence that he had slept in it overnight; his hair resembled a shaggy doormat, and his collar, wristbands, coat and trousers, were all in very bad trim. Before he could face the professor, he must vamp up a bit, and the process necessitated a flight to the regions above—seeing that clean linen, and a change of clothes were not adjunctive to his 'laboratory.'

It was true, a venture of this sort might bring him into collision with his gentle lady, and that would be particularly deplorable, with Dr Bolderlash in the parlour taking notes of it; yet he really must hazard the danger, lest something worse should supervene, for come what would, there could

be no trifling with that magnate from 'Burton's.'

After all, thought he, one danger nullified the other, and fortune favoured the brave. So he decided to make a dash for his dressing-room, first hiding his precious ferule in the cuplward, that trophy which, graciously inscribed though it was, with expressions of unqualified respect and affection them his quandom pupils at the college, he somehow magnitud might be awkwardly out of place, if it should be made to figure in that morning's proceedings. So he locked up his silver darling and put the key in his pocket.

the was just coming to tell him that she had been down to the toy shop and bought him a new cane (it had only cost a penny, but the money was her own), and had slipped it on to his desk in the schoolroom, and our pre-

ceptor appreciated this timely act of hers better than anything she had previously done for him. He was in too great a hurry, however, to express himself, so he patted Conny's head and scurried upstairs to his toilet, where he was in luck, for once; the gentle Celestia not caring, just then, to give a high-sounding performance for the amusement of the listening visitor, so that he was able to present himself in the parlour, in very commendable form, and with reasonable expedition. . . .

'Good-morning, Mr Fledger. Met again, you see, after all these years,—and who'd have thought it?' exclaimed Bolderlash, with delicious bonhomie, and he arose and seized the master's flabby hand with such a mighty grip that its owner could have howled with the pain.

'Good-morning, Professor Bolderlash,' our principal unctuously replied, smirking bravely. 'So glad to see you.'

'Of course, of course you are. I only arrived in the town last night; though I heard great tales about you, and your academy, before I got to bed.' Mr Fledger sickened round the gills. 'So I thought I'd look you up, the first thing this morning, as I leave for London in a couple of hours. I daresay you remember, though it is so long ago, how you ran away from us all, at Mancaster, giving no one an opportunity of saying good-bye, not even your landlord, sly dog; but there, now, don't let that interfere with our present civilities. Evidently, my dear sir, you took a great leap forward, and I congratulate you with all my heart. Show me your school. I wish to see the kind of thing you are doing here. I shall be greatly interested, I assure you, and I may gain a nick or two for myself.'

'Indeed, professor, I shall be most happy to make things agreeable to you,' rejoined our great man, lifted off his feet by these very frank compliments, and glad at the prospect of having such strong and important company as the professor's, in the difficult venture of his reappearance before his boys. 'Shall we go down to the schoolroom at once?' he said. 'My young gentlemen are all assembled.'

'Oh, yes, by all means,' replied the doctor. 'But allow me first, to congratulate you, my dear sir, upon your very beautiful apartment,' looking round the room with a beaming smile. 'And this, I may presume, is a fair sample of the interior and appointments of Waltonbury House, may I not?' pointedly facing the master again.

'Well, ye-es, passably so,' murmured the Fledger, with

a painful smirk.

'Fine old oak ceiling and mantelpiece, I see. Carpet, furniture, wall paper, and everything in keeping too,' continued Bolderlash, lungeing at him again. 'This is rare taste, indeed, sir. Such harmony, such repose, carries one back to the olden times, you know,' taking another survey above him and around him, at the walls, the tawdry ornaments and the puny furniture. 'Very charming, very complete indeed. I should think now that the courtly people who used to inhabit here, must be hovering about you, all the time, and depend upon it, some of them will drop in one night, if they haven't already,' with a look of plausible inquiry, 'to thank you for all your kindly renovations, and to tell you, in a ghostly sort of way, how glad they would be to come back to their quaint old home, now so happily rehabilitated,' and our professor swept his hand graciously above the fiery carpet and over the surrounding fripperies. 'And I see you have a fine pair of stag's horns Nicely decorated, too,' he added, looking in the hall. straight into poor Fledger's eyes. 'Very charming, all very complete, indeed. Will you now lead the way, sir? shall be delighted to follow.'

Now, our schoolmaster was quite sensible of the signal absurdities in his wife's parlour, and of his own piece of humbug displayed upon the antlers, and he writhed under the carvings of the doctor's steel, and felt, despite the horror of the thing, that he would rather have faced a dozen Mrs Fledgers in full roar than be compelled thus to bandy quiet words of nauseous politeness with this ultra-pleasant and ugly customer. . . .

Mr Fledger, in silence, led the way to the schoolroom, treading as he did so, a risky path in his dilemma,—ridicule ahead of him, danger dogging his footsteps, and humiliation lurking close behind.

He wasn't a nervous man, but he certainly felt remarkably shaky. Well, well, it was a predicament he couldn't avoid, so with a desperate effort he puffed himself out to feel important and to look grand, and strutted

along with high-strung ostentation, though that heavy tread at his heels made him confoundedly weak at the core.

They reached the schoolroom, our principal, with great punctilio, throwing the door wide open for the premier entrance of his visitor. Then he bravely found his tongue again (he never lost it for long).

'Here we are, Dr Bolderlash,' he adventured. 'Our young gentlemen, you see, are all at work,' and he rubbed

his hands together.

'Boys! Good-morning!'

There was a general grin, which was reflected from the

faces of the ushers in the guise of a painful frown.

'Hem—h'm—h-h-mm! Good-morning to you, boys and teachers all. I have the pleasure of introducing to you, Dr Henry Hartram Bolderlash, of Burton College, Mancaster, who is favouring us with a visit, and wishes to inspect the academy.'

Pupils and teachers now faced round, en masse, to stare at the stranger, who pursed in his pleasantries and bowed

to them gravely.

'Will you kindly step this way, Dr Bolderlash,' continued Fledger, as he led the doctor up to his rostrum. 'Pray be seated, sir,' and he inducted him into his arm-chair with much ceremony,—devoured with anxiety that the professor should not scrutinise too closely the methods and conditions of the academy. 'May I ask you,' he went on, 'to be kind enough to address a few words to our young gentlemen? But, one moment, my dear sir, just one moment, while I take my usual glance round the school'; and he caught up Conny's nice new cane, and hitching it into his button-hole, stamped about the schoolroom, trying his hardest to feel serene, and to show everybody how perfectly at ease he was, dropping plentiful words of encouragement into the tickled ears of his young gentlemen.

Dr Bolderlash sat down and looked round him. He beheld the pompous display of cartoons, maps and diagrams, which loaded the walls on every side; and his eyes lit up with a merry twinkle and his mouth took on a waggish twist. Then he scanned the numerous restless juveniles spread out in a motley mass beneath him; and the teachers, too, writhing upon their high stools, skirmishing with the classes, or elaborating chalky problems

upon the blackboards. Septimus Ladlaw, parched and cadaverous, stood near to his right elbow, and laboured with the 'principal's own class,' in guttural tones. A red and frowzy little man, by the name of Rufus Quelch, who barked at his boys like a terrier, pounded away on his left. Nemo Sheepshead, 'meek, sleek and callow,' his hair drab and his face pink, ornamented the centre of the room with his limp and politic presence, while Messrs Cramsey and Pinch,—two lesser lights in wisdom, enlivened the distant corners, and added their subordinate quotas to the complex entertainment.

However, this was all very much in the ordinary way of schools, thought the professor, though that emblazonment on the walls, everywhere, from floor to ceiling, was certainly a remarkable feature. He glanced down at the desk in front of him, which, with the summits of the monumental cupboards that flanked and supported it, formed a school-masterly high altar, of imposing proportions, yet not too large for the litter of learning with which it was cumbered.

Primers, histories, geographies, tutors, table-books, grammars and dictionaries, were crowded together in heaps along the front. Stacks of copy-books, blank ledgers, bottles of ink, packets of pens and penholders, chalks, pencils, rulers, ink - erasers, colour - boxes, portcrayons and blotting-paper were tumbled together behind them; while in every gap between-and every snug corner nearer to the master's hand, lay goodlier tomes and properties more discrete,—the varied materia of his daily gasconades, the silent referendaries of all his windy harangues and dissertations. These amongst others—A Book of Latin Phrases, Cassell's Popular Educator, and the Orations of Demosthenes, The Travels of Rolando, Bell's Anatomy, and Hardwick's Chemistry; Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Cuvier's Natural History, The Perils and Adventures of the Deep, Waterton's Wanderings, and The Book of Butterflies,—omitting, by no means, those 'honourable enterprises and deeds of arms,' described in his Chronicles, by good Sir John Froissart,—that soldierly priest and courtly gentleman; nor the lax effusions of sensuous Ovid, nor the sophics of Seneca, the sage,—and with these were jumbled up divers other playthings of a different caste, to wit: The skull of an orang-outang, a marrow

bone which our genius had made elastic by some chemical process, and which he toyed with between times; a magnifying-glass, a magic-lantern and a *Book of Common Prayer*; while, tucked away in a sly corner underneath the desklid, were some sermons of Dr Priestley's and a *Peregrine Pickle*.

Right in the centre,—on top of everything, reposed a pile of exercises, impositions and letters, laid there by the teachers, for the principal's inspection, and from their midst peeped out a folded paper which, from its superior size and stoutness, seemed to our veteran schoolman to be something especial, and out of place.

Curious to learn what this might be, he drew it forth and spread it open before him. It was a picture and a poem, but . . . wheu-u!—Laesa majestas / It was an outrageous lampoon upon the preceptor of Waltonbury, and was formally indited to the master by several of his upper boys.

Dr Bolderlash had indeed happened upon a harvest of mirth, and he instantly decided to garner it in full, no matter as to the consequences, and as he gazed upon the trenchant illustration,—its chief feature, he shook with suppressed laughter, from his brows to his heels. This was what looked impudently up at the doctor through his

gold-rimmed eyeglasses.

Our lordly principal was lying prone upon the ground, and his amiable sister-in-law was squatting beside him, holding him down by the scruff of his neck. His talon-like fingers were rooted in the sod. Desperately upward had he turned his face. The rolling eyes, the snorting nostrils, the wide open, blatant mouth, all evincing his voiciferous agonies, and—well, I suppose I must proceed, if only in a whisper—his unmentionables had been taken down, by whose sacrilegious hand I dare not conjecture, revealing fundamental and nether proportions of no excessive development, 'a man all but his legs,' as you will remember some of his boys used wickedly to call him.

Yes, speaking plainly, poor Fledger's lower parts had been stripped quite bare, so that he might feel the uttermost smartings of a shameful castigation—he was in the process of receiving at the hands of his superior half, who, arrayed in the master's gown and mortar-band, towered in elephantine proportions above him, while she flourished his

cane aloft with unsparing energy for the impending and merciless stroke.

This flagitious pageant was set forth in brilliant colours and drawn in pointed caricature. It filled the major portion of a sheet of paper, nearly three feet square, while stanzas above and a stanza below were inscribed to suit the subject and occasion.

Dr Bolderlash, with this dreadful thing in hand, arose and faced the boys. Had he been about to speechify at an alderman's feast, after doing his whole duty at the festal board, he could hardly have beamed more pleasantly upon everything and everybody around him—the pupils and the teachers, all agog, the dingy schoolroom, and . . . our blue-

gilled Fledger into the bargain.

'Well, my boys,' he began, 'your master has put me up here to say a few words, and, I'm sure, I don't object, although, perhaps, I ought to apologise for occupying this individual spot at this particular time, because . . . well, because I find I have alighted amongst you at the acme of what I choose to call a little domestic pleasantry, which is apparently going on just now between yourselves, within these learned and studious walls,' and he bestowed an obeisant momentary glance upon the surrounding array of maps and diagrams, and the dirty ceiling, stove-pipe and cobwebs. 'Well, you mustn't blame me, for I couldn't help it. It is said, you know, that accidents will happen, even in the best-regulated families, and I think we should extend that exception to young gentlemen's academies, and especially to the most irreproachable and proper of academies, like yours,—so that you will perceive, although I am, in some sort, an eavesdropper, I can have no excuse to play the censor amongst you, even were I so disposed. Standing here, however, as a visitor and a stranger, I feel that you have a right to my best courtesies and encomiums, and I do accordingly take advantage of the first thing coming to hand, which may afford me an opportunity for praising you, and this, regardless of any other comments concerning it which you may be compelled to listen to. I hold in my hands, boys, a most remarkable paper,—quite a curiosity in scholarly endeavour. It was lying here on the desk when I sat down, and appeared to me so unusually important that I was tempted to take a look at it, and I am bound to say,

irrespective of the unfortunate episode it is intended to illustrate, and the points and arguments it sets forth, that this cartoon, firebrand, or whatever you may call it, exhibits considerable cleverness, and most exemplary courage on the part of these young gentlemen who subscribe themselves as its authors. Now, it is quite possible that many of you know nothing about this production, therefore I hold it up for you all to gaze upon before inviting you to listen to the exceedingly strong and personal remarks with which it is loaded. Pray, look at it attentively, all of you, that you may see the gist of these remarks, when I read them to you,' and he turned the villainous picture round and displayed it aloft to the whole school.

'Now, I should like to inquire, boys,' he went on, 'whether you are accustomed to put your studies into such singular forms as this? Because, if you are, I can only say it is a very noteworthy matter. I pronounce it to be an uncommonly good thing in its way, and I have no hesitation in avowing that such a piece of work calls loudly for an adequate recognition and a suitable reward,—whatever differences of opinion may arise amongst the parties it concerns, as to the precise character of the acknowledgments to be tendered and the particular methods by which the recompense shall be conferred'; and he looked steadfastly into the eyes of our wretched principal, who was holding himself together as well as he could—at the farther end of the room.

Now, Mr Fledger, and all the rest of you,' he pursued, 'do listen to this, and be heedful of the hardy talent you are fostering in your midst.' Then he turned the paper round and recited to them with much elocutionary zest, the following bold, bad words, which were marshalled in big letters, between his hands:—

'To our friend and tutor, Frederick Horatio Fledger, Doctor of Philosophy, Member of the College of Preceptors, Fellow of the Society of Arts, Professor of Caligraphy at Burton College, and Esquire.

Imprimis:

'This composite composition is respectfully indited, delineated, subscribed, and presented to you, in the hope that it may prove a suitable memento of our visit to your wife's parlour, on Tuesday afternoon, April 14th, 186—, by your appreciative and grateful pupils,

WALTER BRADDINGTON.
ALLEYNE PERCIVAL.
CHRISTOPHER PUKELEY.
LEONARD ALDERMASTON.

Videlicit :-

Dear Mister, our master, it's all very well The glories and secrets of Science to tell; But you're full of fine fangles, you're agile—pragmatic. You cram all our heads with your mish-mash dogmatic: While with swing exegetic, you flourish your cane: Yet we hope you don't think us a lot of young Blinkers, Not seeing the move for your own little game. To be learned and peerless—triumphantly fearless, In this lilliput-nest—is the breath of your life. So you wallop us soundly, towzle us roundly, But sad to relate—YOU'RE AFRAID OF YOUR WIFE!

'For:

' Horatio Freddy, there's trouble on your brow:
Ruler with a ruler, who has vexed you now?
By Lex Talionis and quid pro quo,
Master, mentor, midas—thou,
Try a turn at ruling your fierce old sow.
Cum Privilegio, Dominus Rex,
Though Fledger you're a FLINCHER when it comes to the sex.

'Here followeth the picture . . . Study it well.

'Yet hush, my Muse, our master lies, Prone upon the earth, yet roaring to the skies: In Articulo Mortis? NO! NOT-AT-ALL.' REGAM! RESURGAM! after my fall.'

It was finished. . . . The professor also came to a full stop, as he swung the pageant round again to the full view of the boys, and his eyes danced and his nose twitched in pent-up merriment. With a searching, sweeping, interrogatory gaze, he fired the fun with his youthful listeners and summoned it forth.

Muffled titterings came responsive from the distant corners of the room, and a gurgling toccata welled up from behind several blackboards; then a light ripple of merriment stole along the front desks, and permeated the pupils behind, and finally—as the doctor suffered his features to relax into a smile that was irresistibly pungent and comical, the whole

school burst forth into a peal of uproarious laughter, which, with one terrible exception, carried everybody along with it, —for a ghostly grin flickered about Septimus Ladlaw's melancholy jaws, like marsh-lights round a charnel-house: a flaring crimson supplanted the rosy flush upon Nemo Sheepshead's face, the velvety smoothness of which was ruckled and spoilt by that gentleman's naughty smirkings: fussy little Rufus Quelch, in spite of himself, bubbled over with barking cachinations, while Messrs Cramsey and Pinch yielded, each in his peculiar way, to that loud and criminal infection. Yea! the very desks and forms creaked and groaned in concert, under the gleeful wrigglings of those delighted juveniles; while our worthy doctor himself sustained the music with his own glorious basso profundo, which rolling round the room in vigorous thunders, gave strength and fibre to the atrocious jollification.

Ah! it was outrageous, and oh! it was sinful.

But the master, the mentor,—what about him? Did he participate in this efflux of happiness? Did he rock himself with bursting satisfaction? Ah, no, indeed, dreadfully no.

How shall I picture to you his purple agonies? his foam-

ing indignation? his overblown and heedless fury?

I cower, aghast, at the tremendous occasion, so far beyond my powers to describe. Great Shakespeare, help me. Nerve my feeble pen to this herculean task. Though, upon second thoughts, I see that I have sent up a froward invocation,—since genius never stoops to air the agonies of a country schoolmaster. Alack and alas! so I must needs scribble along by myself, the best I can.

To proceed then: Our gallant preceptor, arrested in the flow of his generous activities amidst the boys, by that sudden exordium of Bolderlash's, had turned on his heel only to encounter the blasting shock of that heinous attack. He had glared at the damnable thing the doctor held up, and his brain seemed to reel, and his head to open and shut, under the impact of that ludicrous recitation and the riot it had provoked. His nicely-balanced house of cards had tumbled all to pieces, and he found himself caged in a pillory of ridicule; his own proper domain had become a place of torment to him; his boys—a pack of capering imps with red-hot tongs and thumbscrews, and that arch-fiend, Bolderlash,—his high inquisitor. It had come then to this,—

that everybody was in league against him, to put him to torture and compass his ruin. A bottomless chasm yawned at his feet and he felt he was tottering over its brink. For a moment the mainsprings of his life seemed paralysed; in the next, with a savage energy born of despair, he turned to bay. Impolitic, bold and free, all his nicely-balanced subterfuges now flung aside, see him vault and topple over his safer self, thirsting for vengeance.

Alas, my pitiful Horatio, how many a veteran soul, to yours allied by kindred greatness, and racked like yours by the jibes and quirks of scoundrel Fortune, hath plunged thus madly into the swirl of passion, only to be hurried

headlong to its own destruction. . . .

Well then, our terrible Frederick, sputtering with rage, and brandishing aloft his staunch new weapon, made a dash across the schoolroom, strewing a wreckage of books and slates along his course, and bounded up to the front desk in a hurricane of fury.

There in front of him sat those miscreants—Braddington, Percival, Pukeley, and Aldermaston—those leaguers in crime, who had dared to vilify their preceptor and hold him up to

shame.

At this very moment, too, grouped together, they were tickling each other with the gamesome points of their dastardly exploit, and their backs and shoulders, drawn into loving alignment, invited the slashes of the master's cane, and ah, how swiftly should that cane descend upon them,—fierce and merciless, to lace their worthless hides with weals of righteous retribution,—red, black and blue, and as plentiful as the stripes on a zebra.

Now those boys were plural, big and strong, while their master was invidiously singular and—weakish about the knees. Still, he was a man (all but his legs), and besides,

his red-hot fury was worth a whole brigade.

Hearken then to his trumpetings and the clash of arms,

follow the fearful fray, mark the deadly rout.

'Rascals! Rapscallions,' he roared, 'what kind of a fool do you take me for? to think I should swallow your infernal insults and put up with your devilish outrages,—one and all of you,' and he darted a savage glance up over his shoulder at the rubicund usurper from Mancaster, who, having lit up

this hellish conflagration, was looking down upon it in animated satisfaction. 'I see the time has come to teach you something more practical than book-learning; I must convince you it's a dangerous thing to bait the principal of this academy like you would one of yourselves. How dare you play with my authority and make a laughing stock of me. I'll set you right forthwith,' and down came a shower of blows,—upper-cuts, under-cuts, slashes, chops and thrusts, helter-skelter and at all angles to suit the dodging backs and shoulders, bobbing heads, and sprawling arms of those four devoted malefactors. And so ruthless was the ouslaught, that it splintered the stout, new cane in our lordship's hand, besides starting the bad blood of those guilty 'young gentlemen' in a dozen unsightly wounds on faces, neck, and hands, and—I tell you withal that a volley of thunderbolts from the knuckles of Jove, could hardly have wrought a more signal disaster.

Let me fetch a breath and quietly remark that our young conspirators were all 'town boys,' whose parents, when they learnt from their sons the particulars of Mrs Fledger's latest escapade, and had taken a look at the abrasions she had inflicted upon them, had promptly met together, talked the thing over, and in view of this and of other beargarden proceedings, had decided to remove their boys at once from the academy.

Letters were accordingly written, explanatory of their resolves, and their sons were apprised of their contents, and entrusted with their delivery,—when they took their ways, for the last time, to Waltonbury House.

Now the lampoon upon the master had been secretly elaborated over-night by Leonard Aldermaston, who had invited each of the other wrongdoers to his own room, to lend a hand in its production—to be fired off as it were next day as a parting salvo in the master's honour, and they had gone to school earlier than usual, so that the coast might be clear for their nefarious proceedings, and had tucked their cartoon into a heap of exercises on the principal's desk, and had laid their parents' letters in a defensive cluster on the top of everything, trusting by this little arrangement that Mr Fledger when he came down from the house, would read the letters first, and study his picture afterwards; whereupon, they would have nothing more to do but to laugh at his

anger, jeer at his threats, pack up their books and walk

grandly out of the schoolroom.

We have seen, however, that the unexpected coming of Dr Bolderlash had so far, mixed up their programme. Those forefending letters had not been noticed, but the outrageous picture was, and that too by a person for whom it was never intended; and, as a first result, they found themselves in the throes of punishment, before they could show Mr Fledger how superior they now were to his jurisdiction. They were astounded at the master's outburst, and stung to the quick by this severe and humiliating infliction, and as soon as they could recover from the shock of their surprise, the tempest of their indignation swept everything before it.

'What business have you to he knocking us about like this, you consequential old fool?' shouted Aldermaston. 'Boys, let's give it him back,—the damned old butcher.'

'Yes, that we will,' sung out Percival, 'look how he's cut

my hand.'

'Lets all show him a thing or two, now we're in for it,'

vociferated Pukeley.

'Right you are; let's polish up his ugly old face, and give it him over the head and ears,' hissed Aldermaston.

Whe-e-w. Ye Gods! But the scrimmage that followed. Instantly those desperadoes jumped from their seats, clenched their fists, and squaring up to our unfortunate Fledger, laid it on to him and knocked it into him, thick and fast and furious, everywhere and everyhow, until he was bleeding, reeling, and half-blinded—for all his gallant and heavy-handed resistance.

'Ladlaw! Quelch! Sheepshead! All of you,' shrieked the battered and helpless man, scarcely cognisant of his own ravings. 'Don't stand gaping there, while I'm being knocked about like this. Come and beat back these ruffians, you chicken-hearted whelps: can't you see, they're killing me?

'Help! Oh, help!' he gasped, as the blows came thicker and faster upon his blood-smeared visage, and he backed into a corner, with his face very much to the foe, and fairly howled in his anguish. Thus pointedly appealed to, the teachers made an effort to shake off their imbecility. Watchful and wary, they capered round the combatants, pulling this way and shoving that, and cuffing the young boxers from behind, whenever they saw an opportunity,

and getting some 'nasty licks' in rebuttal thereof. At length, Mr Ladlaw, whose gelid nature refused to be warmed up to a natural fervency by the hot occasion, pounced upon Aldermaston, spider-like and venomous, and fastening his lean fingers well down that young gentleman's neck, proceeded to hammer him about the head and ears with a heavy ruler, just as calmly as if he were driving nails into a wall, and though Aldermaston roared and writhed, it was to little purpose, for our cool and calculating Septimus, holding him with tenacious grip, maintained his persistent battery, and would undoubtedly have beaten the boy insensible, had not a potent and overwhelming ally come down into the fray, and turned the tables upon the amazed 'proctor,' who, getting a heavy blow square in the jaw from the fist of Dr Bolderlash, found himself instantly measuring his length upon the floor behind him.

'Off with your clutches from that boy of mine, you lean and scurvy underling,' shouted the professor, as he delivered the blow, 'and if you must take a hand in the scrimmage, tackle me, and I'll give you all the fighting

you'll want for a long time to come.'

But the limp and prostrate Ladlaw had received his quietus, and felt no desire to engage in any further heroics; so scrambling to his feet without reply, he dusted off his soiled and sable livery with a veteran pocket handkerchief, and disposed his trembling frame upon the edge of the master's platform, soothingly rubbed his smarting jowl, and stared at the angry Bolderlash.

'And now, boys,' said the professor, turning round upon the four young gladiators who were in the midst of a three-cornered combat, 'no more of it. Stop it at once, I say; you have gone too far already. Leonard, put your things together, and let us away from here at once. You are none of you altogether blameless in making fun of this man, with your caricatures and your doggerel, and a sound thrashing for it was just what you might have expected, though I see when the fellow gets into full swing he doesn't know when to stop. Come along now.'

'Not altogether blameless, eh?' vociferated the master, seizing the opportunity, in the abatement of hostilities, to wag his tongue again—'not altogether blameless, aren't' they, in their murderous pranks with me?' and he fiercely

faced the professor. 'Mighty fine of you to say so, upon my word; and if they're not blameless, will you be good enough to tell me what business you had to get up there in my place and encourage these young hounds in their abominations? You came here this morning with the set purpose of insulting me with your fine-drawn sneers and your easy-going impudence, you know you did; and not satisfied with that, you goad on these blackguards to ridicule and defy me before the whole school. As to the results, just look at me; yes, look at the pretty plight I'm in—me, the principal of this academy, sir!' and he stuck out his martyred countenance to the view of Bolderlash, and wildly tossed his hands aloft in the extremity of his His eyes were blackened and bloodshot, his nose was bruised and bleeding, his mouth was plastered round with a viscous spume, his hair was fuzzled over his face, his coatcollar torn, his shirt-front ripped open, his sleeves in tatters and his knuckles cut—a sublimely ludicrous spectacle.

The doctor laughed as he looked at him. He couldn't have helped it to save his life. Our maddened preceptor, still further inflamed, launched forth again, reckless of all consequences and setting no bounds to his ire. It was a charge upon stilts, and he was bound to break his neck.

'Tell me, you grinning and arrogant coxcomb,' he raved, 'whether you oughtn't to be cussedly ashamed of yourself for the part you've played in this damnable business? What! laughing at me again? How dare you, sir?' and he stepped up to the doctor and shook his fist within a reasonable distance of his face. 'I'll not stand it another moment. Get out of my premises, sir. Be off with you, I say—out of my sight. You're neither a man nor a gentleman; and as for these bloodthirsty young villains, you can take 'em along with you, for you're all of a piece. I expel them from my academy; I brand them with infamy, and I forbid them ever to darken these doors again.'

Dr Bolderlash buckled and snorted under this virulent attack, the which, extravagant as it was, he failed not to perceive had some grounds in reason,—a fact which angered him considerably, for he was fond of being 'always in the right,' and he forgot his dignity for the nonce in his eagerness to deliver a counter attack. So he glared at his poor antagonist for a few portentous moments, marshalling his

forces; then he suddenly hurled upon him an avalanche of wrath.

'Fledger,' he broke forth, 'listen to me, will you? I learnt last night that my widowed sister's son was attending this precious academy of yours. Along with that knowledge, sir, I gained some other intelligence, the items of which are briefly these—while you are conducting the school-your wife conducts you, extending her sway over the scholars as well; and so rampageous, I am told, has your spouse lately become, that only yesterday she fell upon a score or so of your pupils and thrashed them severely, my nephew amongst the number, and, as I understand it, sir, your important self into the bargain, and locked you up all the afternoon, so that you couldn't even get back to your own schoolroom. Now, Fledger, do you imagine this termagant of yours will be suffered to play such pranks as that with the boys intrusted to your care? Don't you look for a vigorous protest from somewhere that will entail awkward results? In a word, sir, are you fool enough to persuade yourself that this affair, as ridiculous as it is disgraceful, will be condoned by your outraged pupils and their exasperated friends? If you are, you're miserably mistaken. Why, man alive, it's the talk of the whole town; and, of course, everybody'll say the same as I do-that a fellow who assumes to conduct an academy for young gentlemen, while he can't prevent his brute of a wife from slashing into them when she feels like it, is nothing but a despicable poltroon.

'Now I mean to say this is bad enough, but there is worse behind it. Let me freshen up your memory, Fledger. A good many years back—you were only a paltry, ignorant shopkeeper, hailing from God knows where, and never content to stay behind your counter. You were always running at the heels of our people at Burton's, trying to fancy yourself one of them, with your toadying tricks and your ludicrous pretences, clerical clothes, white chokers, crack-jaw words and all that; and you pushed your nonsense to such an extreme that we shunned you as a nuisance, all round. Snub was the word with everybody, and it was well carried out. But you were too thick-skinned to take offence and too persistent to be choked off. At length the college servants slammed the

doors in your face, and the very cats about the refectory kitchen would scuttle off at your approach—eh, Fledger?

'After that you neglected your business, got into debt, and one fine day—gave us the slip, and some people who wanted to see you could never find out where you had gone to. Years passed away, and we all forgot you.

'Now yesterday I happened into this locality, when lo and behold! who should I find here but that same college jackanapes of ours, in full blossom as a preceptor, and showing off as a very great man in this very small town, hoisting up a signboard big enough to be seen from Land's End to John-o'-Groats, and calling himself, in addition to several other things,—a professor of caligraphy. Ha! ha! ha!—a professor of caligraphy! And from Burton College, Mancaster, forsooth! Boys!' shouted the doctor (he had faced sharply round to the astounded scholars), 'I am a muster of that college, and have been from the beginning, and you may take my word for it,' and he shook a forefinger at the principal, 'that we never harboured this splendid professor there, nor any other quack gentleman of his ilk. No, indeed, confound his impudence; and the only thing the fellow ever did, that I could see, besides following us about and wagging his tongue, was to write visiting-cards, at 1s. 6d. per dozen, on a rickety table in his little back shop, that would be littered up with the fag-ends of his poverty lunchs-eggshells, stale crusts, bacon rinds, a half-munched red herring or a clean-picked mutton-bone, saved over for the marrow. That's how matters stood.

'Something more, boys. I'm told that your master's very fond of flourishing a silver ruler about, engraved all over with testimonials from his chums at the college, and that he leaves it about on the desks for you to inspect. Now, boys, I tell you that's a fraud too—a stupid and impudent fraud, for he had no chums at the college, and the only testimonial he ever stood the chance of receiving was a sound kick in the rear, if he had dodged round about us much longer.

'Now as to this caricature,' and he reached for the villainous paper and faced the master, 'it's broad and pointed, I don't deny, and it's a clever piece of work, as I said before—just the sort of thing you richly deserved; and let me tell you, Fledger, when you get a lot of boys

together like this, and play crooked tricks with them, you're pretty sure in the long run to find some who are fearless enough to resent it; and I mean to say that you ought to value this effusion very highly. Professors of caligraphy, doctors of philosophy, and so forth, don't get testimonials of this kind every day, I assure you. Still, as you don't appear to covet the little memento, I'll keep it myself' (folding it up and tucking it in his pocket).

'And now, Fledger,' concluded the doctor, as he put on his hat, 'take this piece of advice from me,' shaking his forefinger, 'if you do so desperately hanker after a master-ship—first of all, get the upper hand in your own beargarden, and, if you have pluck enough, curb the woman who plays tyrant there; then drop your shams and lying pretences, and lead an honest and manly life; otherwise look out for more trouble, further disgrace and ultimate ruin. That's all. Come along, boys; you don't look very presentable, but there, it's raining hard, so it won't matter,' and the redoubtable Bolderlash turned his back on the gaping scholars, the quaking teachers, and the speechless, pale and gasping principal, and departed with a fine swing by the way he had come, followed by Masters Percival, Braddington, Pukeley and Aldermaston, those 'warriors bold,' who had won their wicked liberty.

The school-room door was swung to with a savage bang as they all went out, and our great man was relieved of the presence of his enemies. So he glared around him, drew a long breath, and mechanically obeying an accustomed impulse, clambered up into his rostrum; but a hasty survey of his pupils quickly convinced him that he was more an object of jocund speculation than of dutiful regard. Ensanguined, battered and tousled, he was nothing but 'a regular guy' to those lark-loving juveniles. promptly withdrew from the impish light that was playing about his throne, and descending to the common level, drove his fingers through his tangled hair, rammed his hands into his trousers' pockets, and began pacing to and fro in the friendly shadow of his barbican cupboards, scowling meanwhile at the dirty floor, and trying gallantly hard to think of something plausible to say,—while all around him reigned a pregnant silence.

'Boys!' he at length exclaimed, stopping short in his

tracks, jerking up his head and flinging his fists aloft— 'boys! that man who has just gone out has been my enemy for years and years. We had some difficulties at the college—long ago—over a certain matter in which I got the better of him.'

(There was a modicum of truth in this assertion, for just previous to his undignified departure from Mancaster, Mr Fledger had taken the doctor's money for a dozen visiting-cards, and had decamped without filling the

order.)

'Yes, I got the better of him, and after that, he could never forgive me. I thought, when he called upon me this morning, after all that time, that he wanted to make it up with me, but I was vastly mistaken. I did all that a gentleman could do, to heal the breach between us, but to no purpose, for he began sneering at me before he had been in the house five minutes; and you have, yourselves, just heard him defame my honourable character with all the foulest lies he could lay his tongue to,—and in all that he has said, mind, there wasn't a word of truth about me, nor anything I had ever done; as my former friends at the college would tell you, if it was possible for me to bring them here before you; and I do say, it is inconceivably infamous and shameful of Dr Bolderlash, and er-cruelly hard for me to bear besides. And yet, I am proud to think that you will all refuse to believe, in toto, his calumnies concerning me, and will continue to repose that entire faith and confidence in your preceptor which has always so creditably distinguished you; and I say to you, moreover, from this time forward,—permit no one to attack the honour of this academy, nor reflect for a moment on the bona-fides of its master, and er-we'll quickly turn the tables upon our foes. Magnus est veritas et prevalebit.' He paused, cast his blackened and bloodshot eyes around him on the upturned faces of his boys, -- anxiously, appealingly, desperately,—to gather what favour his remarks had gained.

desperately,—to gather what lavour his remarks had gained. But, sad to relate, the faces of his elder pupils were distorted with sardonic smiles; their eyes were a-gloat for mischief; their mouths were twisted in mutinous whisperings, and their noses sniffed the air for the scent of a scrimmage; while the smirking countenances of the younger ones showed him, only too plainly, that they also had lost a saving faith in their principal, and were ready to join the upper boys in any enormity they might bring to a head.

Altogether it was evident to the master, that a sinister spirit had crept into the academy, the workings whereof were but thinly concealed from him, and he quakingly bethought him of how he should comport himself if the whole school were to rise in open rebellion. He had already been badly worsted in a conflict of far less magnitude, and he trembled in his shoes for the probable consequences, and conceived the hasty wisdom of making himself scarce for a time,—tacitly conceding in this case, what he seldom had in any other, that discretion was the better part of valour.

So he urgently put forth the unctuous hope that his 'young gentlemen' would not fail in their duties to themselves and to him; told them they must now excuse him for a while, though he would endeavour to be with them in the afternoon, when he trusted he should find every boy attentive and diligent, and wound up his performance with the startling, bravura that this was the least he had a right to expect of them. Then, muttering a few directions to his Septimus, who was standing aside as rigid as a corporal, he tamely took himself off to his laboratory. Safely within its sheltering walls, however, his fury and despair began to reassert themselves, as he realised how much he had lost, and how ignominiously he had lost it; and he ravened up and down in his little room, lashing himself into a fury, heaping execrations upon Dr Bolderlash, Burton College and all the 'prigs' who had ever belonged to it, and staggering under a riot of wrath against the potent partner of his joys and sorrows.

'Is it for this that I have sweated and slaved all my life, in season and out of season, and year after year?' he shouted to himself. 'Ah! if I hadn't been such an accursed idiot as to get hanked in with that diabolical woman, I should have escaped all these torments now.' He paused a moment and went on again. 'She's possessed of the devil, and she's bent on ruining me. I've seen that for a long time. Good God! and am I to be laughed at for a fool, and the finger of scorn pointed at me indoors and out of doors just because of that woman's hideous pranks? Why, the thing's a crime, a black, burning outrage; that's what it is!'

He paused this time, for several minutes, in fuming indignation. 'But what can I do?' he broke forth once more. 'How can I face it all? that's the question; ah! that is indeed the question.' He ceased his prowlings, heaved a heavy groan, wildly smote his forehead, and utterly overcome by his despairing frenzies, plunged blindly into his arm-chair. Now that easy-chair of his had been a patient, long-suffering piece of goods. Week in, week out, and year after year, it had borne the brunt of the master's humours (with what deep-seated resentment, it would be impossible

But it was no longer the chair of its younger days. Its plumpness had vanished, particularly where that quality was most in demand; its joints were shaky and its frame relaxed, so that all over and right through, it was ready to give way, and this last staggering blow was too much for it; the wretched thing collapsed with a loud twang, the seat was rent in twain and the nether parts of our Frederick, which he had confided so impetuously to its support, came down with a thump on to the floor beneath. Mr Fledger scrambled out of the wreckage and stood and stared at it with vengeful eye. 'The devilish thing is against me, I see, like everything else,' he passionately exclaimed; and giving it a hearty curse and a still heartier kick, hurled it into a corner, where it landed bottom upwards, the ragged hole in its seat seeming to stare at him in open-mouthed horror.

'Damn it!' he ejaculated, looking sharply round him, after this performance, and scratching his head, 'now there's nothing for me to sit down upon.' It was true. There was nothing in the room which might serve as a seat for a

gentleman of his calibre.

He could have clambered into the chemical sink, of course, and have rested him dangle-legged in the midst of a filthy segregation deposited there. But if the idea occurred to him, he instantly dismissed it, not only as lacking any promise of comfort, but also as affording no possibility of indulgence in those varied poses of abandoned sorrow to which his histrionic soul was aching to surrender itself.

Flinging open his cupboard, he drew forth from a bottom shelf several black and bulky volumes. Casuist works were they: summa casuum concientiae, writ by the Romish fathers, Raimunde of Penaforte, St Thomas Aquinas and

other scribes akin. (He had picked them up cheap, at a London bookstall years before, for the purpose of showing off with, though he had never delved into their pragmatical depths.)

With such tomes as these he piled him up a hard and

lowly stool, and straightway subsided upon it.

Behold him, dismally squatted on that heap of out-worn sophistries, his chin clutched in his hands; his tattered elbows poised upon his tilted knees; himself a worn-out

pedant and a used-up fraud.

So he sat and gaped into the empty fireplace confronting him—savage, disconsolate and forlorn, not uttering a word nor thinking coherently, nor giving any heed to his throbbing bruises and tingling abrasions; yet, grinning anon, with a ghastly grin, at the aches and pains of his mangled spirit; while out of the murk of that chimney-corner, cold and void, where never yet for him had flamed the altar-fires of home, two brass-headed fire-dogs, perky-identical, grinned back in his face with steadfast, mocking irony. . . .

Repose thee there, oh, master mine, with all such sorry restfulness as thou canst by any means compass, while I steal away to take cognisance of thy turbulent fledglings, by thee so heartlessly forsaken. I will return very shortly and slap thee on the back as an old acquaintance; though, should my salutation prove to you very like the smitings of a harlequin, still, Horatio, never give up. To it again, man, with thy property duds, spangles, burnt cork and all the rest of it. Strut forth to thy stagey task once more. By-and-by, we'll shift the scenes for thee, so that achieving no betterment, still—thou mayest, at least, learn the merits of variety.

Yes, Frederick, for it's useless repining. Be assured that our poor little drama holds no happier caste for thee than to worry like a dog, at the heels of fortune, in common with a host of thy superiors. Yet please to remember, sir, thou servest only for a season—briefly. Then will we write thee Finis.

After that? Ah, well, there'll be rest enough in the grave, whither thou goest. *Mors omnibus communis*—Take another sippet out of your own hash.

CHAPTER XII

THE THROES OF SEDITION

To checkered fields of ordered fruitfulness, whose bounteous response yields cordial largess to the hand of toil, how woeful cometh the shrieking tempest, from alien wastes, set free—to scatter devastation o'er the smiling land; or, furious floods, mayhap, from mountain heights descending,—to whelm each beauty-spot beneath, in broadcast, quenching ruin,—merciless and uncontrolled.

In this wise lamentable, I beg you to concede, was that instant rowdy license, which swayed the daring spirits of Waltonbury House Academy, immediately upon the departure of its founder-father. Yes, quite as deplorable, if hardly so tremendous, was that scholical convulsion which supervened.

For here was a garden our master had digged and planted; herein had he taught his sprightly scions 'how to shoot,' trailing their tendrils around the upset staves of duty—duty of his own propounding.

And how patiently, too, had he snipped and grafted them, and coaxed forth their fruitage, with flamboyant pride.

Yet, mark the hideous change . . . hurricane Bolderlash sweeps athwart the scene,—uproots, prostrates, destroys,—and all the work of years, forthwith, is overborne; while Sedition's rankling weeds run riot in the soil. . . .

Well, to drop the Fledgeresque and put it to you plainly. Our seminary seethed and bubbled. The worried teachers frowned and reddened, their responsibilities and their embarrassment being equally great.

They beat a lively tattoo on their desks, with their knuckles and rulers, in the interests of order and due subordination. But all to no purpose. Then they pulled some of the pupils' ears, and knocked several pairs of their heads together, in estoppel of certain close and contumacious whisperings, and laboured vehemently with book and pointer to hold those dreadful scholars to their tasks. But none of it would do.

Outcries, catcalls and laughter assailed their outraged ears,

and as they still persisted in their orderly endeavours, they were treated to a more trenchant style of rejoinder. up, you fool, go and ram your head in a sack.' 'Who cares for you, do you think?' and other straightforward and rugged enunciations which left them no alternative, in their lame vicegerency, but to fret and fume and bubble over in concert.

'I say, you fellows, haven't we had enough of this?' was the loud and point-blank inquiry of a certain Thisby senior, as he mounted a form and addressed his upper schoolmates. 'This master of ours is a regular old duffer. Let's give him the slip. Come along, boys, it's useless hanging on to this

hole now, for it's all U-P with Fledger.'

'Right you are,' spoke up Masters Sylvester, Salter and Memlow primus.

'All serene,' remarked the premier and sententious Lomax,

with an echo from his brother, the secundus.

'Quits! right away,' exclaimed the impulsive and practical Danks. And the next moment, those audacious rebels, with a dozen of the same kidney, jumped up from their seats, and bustled to business. Each 'young gentleman' strapped his books together, forming a lumpy, cornerish and exceedingly offensive weapon, which, swinging at the end of a yard of overplus leather, combined the handy qualities of a sledgehammer and a boomerang. Then they buttoned up their jackets, and clapped on their caps, and fell into line for the daring deed.

'Now then,' shouted Thisby, 'away we go,' and promptly taking the lead, he and the other malefactors made a dash for the street-door followed by a number of the smaller fry, to whom these upper boys had always been an example and a great commandment. Thereupon, the horrified teachers rushed in a body to bar the exit of the insurgents, shouting

for the boarders to help them.

Now, these youngsters were quite as willing to knock off their fetters as the uppers, having, indeed, better reasons for so doing; but they couldn't forget that their homes lay mostly in distant parts of the country, and that it was impossible to reach them in this slap-dash fashion.

It was true they had heartily relished the adventures of Master Dick Whittington, as set forth to them by their 'friend and tutor,' along with the other good things of his afternoon lectures, and especially, how he had toiled along

the 'King's highway' to London and to fortune, and the bells of the great city had seemed to fling a gladsome rhythm into their ears,—'triple-bob-majors' of Inspiration, as patent to them—as they had been to that gallant boy so long before, as he sate him down, wayworn and wavering, by the roadside at Highgate, and hearkened to the magic music:-

> 'Turn again, Whittington, Thrice Lord Mayor of London.'

Oh! it was very inspiriting.

But then, our crafty pedagogue had been careful to offset the all too peripatetic bearing of that fine old legend by several subsequent readings from the story of A French Prisoner of War in England, and from other tales of runaway hardship and disaster; not failing to dilate, in terrorem, and with much emphasis, upon the sufferings of those heroes in the same.

These things his fledglings had remembered. Visions arose to their chastened fancies, of endless winding roads and miles upon miles of weary trudging for their poor little legs thereon; with scrips and purses far too slender, and of fearhaunted lurkings in the woods at mid-day, with shivering roostings under hay-stacks at night; dieting meanwhile, on furtive purchases of bread and cheese, eleemosynary scraps and village pump-water,—with the damning prospect of a sound thrashing, at the tag-ends of their journeys, from foster-father, step-mother, marble-hearted guardian married sister shrew; and the hideous finale, of being bundled back into the fold of the gentle shepherd at Waltonbury. Yes, delivered up to the augmented amenities of the whole tribe of Fledgers from bantlings to sire.

Wherefore, taking all these drawbacks into rapidlywhispered consideration, they decided to eschew the heroic, and making a virture of necessity, enlist on the trusty side of established authority,—hoping to earn for themselves some

credit thereby.

Instantly, now, with martial shouts, the town boys delivered their onslaught, and the trenchant handling of their lissome weapons was indeed a brave sight to behold. They swung their book-bundles high, they swung them low, they hurled them sidelong and whirled them across, with delightful readiness and dexterity, bringing them down with trip-hammer precision, wherever they wanted to, every time; ergo—upon the pates and shoulders of their opponents; much desultory practice upon former occasions having made them adepts in the bouncing handicraft; and whenever a 'cad' got a real 'nasty clout' atop of the head, or under the ear or over the mouth, from one of those truncheons of learning, it was as convincing to the recipient as the thump of that big Bible which Martin Luther flung at the devil, and placed him hors de combat upon the spot.

Under these conditions, our renegades quickly cleared a path to the door, and the teachers who stood guarding it, nervous and resolute. 'Out of the gangway, you dirty grinders,' they shouted, 'or we'll mash you into a jelly.' A desperate combat now ensued. The ushers, for prudential reasons, endeavoured to avoid striking their assailants, but a few stinging blows in their faces had the inevitable effect of raising their danders, when they laid about them with a will, and soon inflicted severe punishment upon the aggressors. Mr Rufus Quelch, especially, who was a fiery little man, blazed up to his duty in fine style, and being well seconded by Messrs Cramsey and Pinch, very soon made it apparent to the rebels that they were engaged in a hopeless enterprise.

Meanwhile, the 'cads,' routed in their point-blank resistance, were surging up behind and getting in their

nimble handiwork, whenever they saw an opening.

'The windows, boys,' shrieked Thisby, all of a sudden. 'Let's make for the windows.' Then he leaped on to a sill, and was clinging frantically to a fastening above, to offset a tugging he felt at his ankles, when the window-sash gave way, falling with a crash upon the 'cads' beneath, and staggered their onslaught long enough for the town boys to climb through the opening, which they did with wonderful expedition—giving each other a leg up over backs and shoulders, in their eagerness to escape, and coming down, helter-skelter, in the lane outside.

At last the road was clear, and they were free, but, jee-Willikins! they were in a dreadful pickle. Was it possible for them to tidy up a bit for their run down town?

Well, no, it was not, for the teachers had thrown open the door, and those pestilent 'cads' were already surging out

after them, just round the corner; so if they should delay their flight for an instant, they would be nabbed and hustled back again to 'durance vile,' and well they knew it. It was sauve qui peut, therefore, and they dared not hesitate; so with a dashing heroism born of stern necessity, they struck out for the High Street, and for home,—torn, tousled and bleeding. Ah, it was a scandalous, heinous, hideous outbreak, the like of which had never shamed fair Waltonbury's quiet streets before.

Well, there was a pell-mell scamper down the lane, and then, pursued and pursuers debouched in full swing round the corner, into the broad and muddy High Street, as they did so, playing havoc with Clipfarthing, Yardley & Sons pavement display of printed calicos, 'Cardigan jackets' and 'Boston scarves,' which happened to be planted in their way. These impedimenta overthrown, together with sundry 'counter-jumpers,' who had rushed out to rescue the goods, the wild stampede careered down the middle of the road, carrying with it, as a matter of course, most of the out-of-doors folk in the line of its flight.

The 'butchers and bakers and candlestick makers,' the joskins, errand boys, and servant 'gals,' who, at that time in the morning, dotted the pavements, all fell in with the race, pitching up a hue and cry as they dashed past the Corn Exchange—a tearing throng of several hundred souls. The sedate and elderly farmers, discoursing business upon the steps of that building, wheeled round to them, as with one consent, in stern reprobation; but they counted for

nothing in the eyes of the throng.

Further down the road, old carpenter Mortiss, standing outside with his hands tucked under his coat-tails, was unfolding a meracious story to a chum of his; but upon seeing that dangerous rout advancing, he cut short his lubrics, and bundled in, from their advanced position on the public highway, a sample frame of blind-rollers, a chest of drawers, a towel-rack, a horse-hair sofa, and a meat-safe, as fast as his stiff old arms and legs would let him, and piled them higgledy-piggledy amongst the benches and shavings in his son-in-law's workshop.

As an odious chance would have it, a long string of fair damsels, piloted by their governesses, was returning to the ladies' seminary, from a confirmation class. They had been freshly primed in godliness, were faultless in fashion and the pinks of propriety; therefore, to behold the veiled astonishment of those nice-appointed maidens as they gazed upon our 'young gentlemen,' and witnessed the rushing tide of their escapade, was the cruellest torment those fugitive sparklings had ever been compelled to suffer. It was the quintessence of agony, and you might as well have broken them on the wheel.

However, the 'town boys' kept a good lead of the chase; and as one after the other made a dash for a side street or through a gateway to their various homes, it became apparent to the teachers that, in attempting to run them down, they had deplorably blundered, and that the hunt

was hopeless.

'It's no use, boys; we must let them go,' groaned Septimus Ladlaw, almost breathless, as he turned upon his heel, mopping his sweltering brow, and attempted to stem the torrent with his lank and outstretched arms. 'Get you back to the academy—every one of you,' he entreated. 'This affair will cause a dreadful scandal, and we shall have the whole town upon us pretty soon, if we don't be quick. Look at the people at the windows. See them coming out of their shops,' and he and the teachers, convinced of their folly, headed a precipitate retreat, in the teeth of a jostling, cheering, taunting multitude who, having run alongside with hearty goodwill, were thus thrown upon their haunches by this change of front.

'Ugh! showing the white feather, eh?' 'Keep up your peckers.' 'Never say no till you die,' and other encouraging maxims were hurled at them on every side, as they struggled back to headquarters through the surging

crowd. . . .

'Young gentlemen,' gasped Mr Ladlaw, as he dangled limply over his desk, their wild sortie finished; 'I perceive—ugh!—that you are in no condition to resume your studies. Therefore, go quietly up to your dormitories and wash your hands and faces and—ugh!—brush your clothes. We will accompany you, to preserve order; and when you come down again—ugh!—I think we may as well go in to dinner.'

The boys arose with grins and grunts and filed out

through the playground to clamber up the ramshackle staircase at the back of the house (Mrs Fledger's alternative stairway, you will remember), to disappear, one by one, in the attic—the ushers following them, dilatory and downhearted. . . .

'Ladlaw,' snapped frousy little Quelch, as he jerked up his rumpled coat-collar, and strutted along beside the 'proctor'; 'this is going to be a serious business, you mark

'I should think so, indeed,' groaned Septimus, from the depths of his empty stomach. 'I shall not be surprised if it leads to the downfall of this academy, and to our own dismissal.'

Perspicacious Septimus had foreshadowed the Fates.

CHAPTER XIII

PITY PROMPTS TO RASH RESOLVES

THE scholars and teachers have seated themselves for their mid-day meal; much good may it do them. So, steal we softly back to our principal, squatted in the laboratory. Yes, for there sat Horatio still, perched upon his polemics; his face rooted in his clutching fingers; his elbows stuck upon his knees—a cowering figure, silent and forlorn; a tattered remnant of his former self.

So crouched and still a thing was he, and apparently so exanimate, that a mother mouse with her infinitesimal young popped out from the chimney corner, unperceived; regarded him steadfastly awhile, ruminate and wary; then twitching their noses, they capered round him on the floor; exploring the chinks between his pedestal books; playing bo-peep about his feet, and nibbling at the toes of his shoes. No crumbs of comfort there.

High upon the wall, the sun streaked in from the latticewindow, accentuating the gloom beneath.

The handle cluttered in the laboratory door, and Conny came hurrying into the room, fresh from the 'ladies'

seminary'; she had not taken off her hat and cloak, so exceedingly urgent was she.

'Pa, dear, I want to tell you something; I'm sure you

don't know it.'

The master made no movement.

'Pa,' she went on excitedly, 'all your school, teachers and everything, have been running down the street, fighting like furies. The girls that went to the confirmation class met all the lot, and you should just have heard 'em jabbering about it.'

The master groaned.

'Yes, pa, they're just as full of it as ever they can be; and one of 'em told me that—why, father,' she exclaimed, as she went up to him, 'whatever's the matter with you? There's blood all over your hands, and round your ears'; and as she looked him over, she quickly realised his deplorable condition and dropped her inventories in faltering dismay.

'Oh, pa,' she broke forth again; 'tell me; you do look so horrible; what can it mean?' and she fell upon her

father's neck, bursting into tears.

Mr Fledger tried to rise, but his girl clung to him

passionately, and would not be shaken off.

'Father, oh! why don't you speak to me?' she cried. But he answered her nothing. Looking round the room in her distraction, she caught sight of the old arm-chair, thrown into the corner. 'Oh, I see it all now,' she screamed; 'somebody's been in here trying to murder you, and they've smashed that chair over your head. Oh! whatever shall I do?'

'Nonsense, child,' blurted out the principal, surprised into speaking by his daughter's wild conjectures; 'let me get up.' And again he made an effort to jump to his feet. But in the momentary struggle his books slipped from under him, and for the second time that fateful morning, the master found himself floored.

'Dann it, Conny!' he exclaimed, kicking the books away; 'you've no sense at all. Can't you see I want to be left alone? I was a fool not to lock the door; but I won't forget it another time.' And he faced round with his legs astride, and glared at his poor little girl—a hideous and contemptible object.

Conny's eyes sought her father's in heart-broken wonder: but the man was too much inflamed by his own agitations to show her any gracious response, and met her dumb entreaties with a scowl; and she, poor child, whose heart he had but lately trained to seek solace in his captious favours, took sudden, great alarm. Her lips quivered in silent agony; then piteously she cried, 'Father, oh, father, I've no one to love but you, and you are the only one who has ever been kind to me except Mollie; and I've tried all I could to please you, and now you've turned against me like all the rest. Oh! why was I ever born to live a life like this?' And clapping her hands to her face, she sank to the floor, sobbing bitterly; and while her unshapely frame shook with the violence of her emotions, her father strode about the room, his chin stuck up, studying the cobwebby ceiling, but feeling, nevertheless, in his shabby old heart, as though ice were being laid upon his hot resentment, though his vulgar selfhood was huffed at the prospect of a tame surrender.

At length he stopped short and raised his daughter by the arm, speaking to her more gently. 'Come, Conny, leave off crying and get up; I wonder why you must always be pestering round me at a time like this? You can't do any good, and that you ought to know without my telling

you.'

'Oh! father, dear. Pa, dear, I do so want to be of some use to you. Why won't you let me try? Besides, what harm have I done now, for you to go on at me like this?'

'Well, well,' snapped Mr Fledger, trying to dodge the awkward question; 'let it be either pa or father, when you talk to me, please; I don't care which, but I can't stand

both; it's too absurd from a girl of your age.'

'You taught me to say pa,' replied Miss Constance, flushing crimson, and looking at him reproachfully through her tears, 'but I'd rather call you father, and I'll never say pa any more.' She was cut to the quick, and she kept her word.

We may well believe, too, that even to Miss Conny's nebulous perceptions, the harried creature standing there before her, so battered, rent, unloveworthy, was pointedly unfit to be petted with the name of 'pa': he might be a 'daddy' but he was surely not a 'pa.' Still, our Constance

was instinct with loving-kindness, and could ill afford to be squeamish in her likings. He was her father after all, outraged, miserable, and, as she now believed, without a friend in the world; besides, she had none other to love her, and no one else to love, and all her hampered, hungering soul went out to him in daughterly affection. So she wiped away her tears, and put aside her grief, and going gently up to him, took his hand.

'Never mind, father,' said she, 'about what I'm to call you, only be kind to me, and love me, won't you?' A mollified grunt was the only response, and it didn't seem greatly in her favour; so she went on, not giving him time for a harsh reply, 'I'll go and get you another chair out of the nursery, and wash your poor face and the cuts on your hands, and comb your hair, and then I'll fetch you up some things from the kitchen, and we'll have dinner together, like we did before; and when you feel better, you'll tell me what more I can do for you. So there, father, you just wait a minute!' and putting her arms round his neck, she pulled him down to her and kissed him; then ran off, full of eagerness to execute her loving ministrations.

Miss Constance was not a big girl, as I have shown you; still, she was pretty strong, for she hauled a heavy old armchair from the nursery, down the back stairs, out of her mother's hearing, with remarkable quietness and despatch, and landed it in the laboratory, beside her father's little table. Then she quickly supplemented it with a chair for herself, purloined from her own little room, with a washbasin, sponge, soap and towel, comb and brush, and a pillbox of cold cream—(it was evident she meant business), and soon had her disploded and unresistant daddy ensconced in his new seat, and submitting himself, with resignation, to some very timely ablutions and salvings at her nimble hands.

'There, father,' remarked the little trump, eyeing him over when she had finished, while she brushed back his hair in a parting sweep from his bruised and bony forehead; 'you look more comfortable now, but you'll have to change your shirt to-morrow morning; it's in a dreadful state; and put on your best coat, too, while I mend this one.'

Then she ran off again, but soon returned, thanks to the free-handed complaisance of Mrs Buttox, with another little

dinner, similar to that I described before. So she set out the things and locked the laboratory door; and father and daughter, hobnobbing together, did plenary justice to the impromptu feast; and when our Frederick had tossed off a final glass of 'Burton ale,' the blood began to tingle in his cheeks again, and his gorge to ruckle with gallinaceous bravadoes.

'They're thinking they've shut me up for good, I daresay. But they haven't. Not a bit of it. Only let 'em wait till that Bolderlash takes himself off, and they shall just see —what they shall see.'

'But, father,' interposed Conny, 'who knocked you about

like this? was it that gentleman, then?'

'No, no, child, of course not; it was a parcel of young blackguards in the upper class, if you must know. They had the impudence to caricature me over that hellish business in your mother's sitting—in the parlour, I mean—actually laid the thing on my desk—it was as big as a sheet—ready for me to look at this morning. Didn't I give it 'em for it—that's all. Then that fellow Bolderlash took their parts, and hounded them on to attack me, like a lot of young blackguards, as they are. Of course I soon settled their business for 'em, and kicked 'em out of the school, Bolderlash and all; but it was a tough bit of work. I couldn't expect to come off scot-free amongst so many of 'em; but I showed 'em the stuff I was made off, and they'll carry my marks about with 'em many a long day.'

'And I think you'll carry their marks about with you many a long day, too, father: I only wish you could see yourself,' said matter-of-fact Conny. 'Shall I get that bit of looking-glass down off the wall, for you to look in?'

'No, no, no, child, what a nuisance you can make of yourself sometimes, to be sure. Now let me alone, Conny; I must think what I'm going to do,' and he shook himself up, shoved his fingers through his newly-smoothed locks, and fingered at his button-hole, in mechanical quest of his cane.

Long and painfully he wrestled with his emergencies, twisted, scowled, and fidgeted—unable to resolve, and Conny, enveloped in her cloud of reproof, sat silent, with her hands in her lap, and wistfully gazed at him.

Half an hour passed in these uncomfortable cogitations, and then the master gave tongue to his new-made resolu-

tions, speaking to himself rather than to the patient creature at his side.

'This is a bad, bad business,' quoth he, 'and it comes near breaking my back. Still, there oughtn't to be so much

to fear from these country bumpkins.'

Mr Fledger realised that a dreadful gap had been blown in his defences; nevertheless, he would himself fill the breach and construct himself anew. All things were possible to the brave.

'I'll have at 'em again,' he went on to himself. 'Let me see. A good rousing lecture would be the thing. They're deuced fond of my lectures. It amuses 'em, and they get 'em for nothing. Yes, and it'll give me a capital chance to butter 'em up and slither 'em down, too, and I'll lay it on thick this time. Yes, yes, that'll be the way; I can patch up everything and prove my footings, and have something over to spare. That'll be it.'

Then he rummaged in the repertory of his past expedients, bending his hairless brows over his damaged eyes, and cudgelling his brains in search of a concrete

formula.

'I have it!' at length he exclaimed, thumping the table. A lecture on Paris. That's a subject I can say a good deal about, to tickle these rustics. Plenty of scope for something fresh, and that goes down with 'em every time. Yes, a lecture on Paris, with cartoon illustrations, in colours,—just as soon as I can get it ready. I was there for a few days last summer,' he mused, 'so I ought to know something about it, and—er—what I don't know I can make up; my audience won't be particular, so long as I keep 'em interested, and I'll take devilish good care to do that. Yes, "A New and Remarkable Discourse upon Paris," I'll call it: I can build myself up again on that foundation: and, in fact, I'll turn over a new leaf altogether, from this time forward. Seems to me, I haven't made enough of myself hitherto, and I'll just show the people hereabouts, a bit of my mettle. I flatter myself I can talk as well as any man, and talking is half the battle in this Yes, indeed,' and he threw his arm upon the table and approvingly drummed thereon.

'You've never told me anything about Paris, father,'

dubiously interjected Conny.

'Well, never you mind about that, child. I could if I liked. I see very well if I want to stop these people's mouths, I must give 'em something better to talk about than my cussnation private affairs, and I can't begin my work too soon. Run down to the schoolroom, Conny, and fetch me a roll of cartoon paper, the gum bottle, and my colour-box out of the middle cupboard, and that big drawing-board at the back of the platform. Here are the keys of the cupboard. There's no one in the schoolroom yet, for I can hear 'em in the refectory. And-er-you might go over to the library, and see if they've got a popular work on Paris. If they have, bring it home with you. freshen my memory a bit. You wanted to know what you could do, now I've told you, so run along and do it, and—er—bring me up another bottle of ale, the last thing, and our preceptor clinched his exhortations with a rousing send-off with his nose and pocket-handkerchief, under the impetus of which his daughter meekly sped away to execute her father's behests, leaving the great man to tone himself up for his task, by swaggering about the room with his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets.

Half an hour later, handmaiden Conny had furnished him with a big roll of paper, a huge drawing-board, and a capacious colour-box, daubed and dirty, together with a little dog-eared *Paris Handbook*, which she had pulled out from a dark corner in the town library. Nor had she forgotten that *liquid* inspiration, called for in her father's last

enjoinder.

And you may fancy our principal, oblivious now to the sores of his late discomfiture, his coat tossed aside, slashing about him with his nervy pencil, and his brushes, a-drip with vivid water-colours, upon the blank, white squares perched up in front of him; striking off, in rapid fervour, his sprightly memories of things Parisian,—gilded domes and frowning towers, sumptuous gardens and stately palaces, the corners of the paper jotted about with his supplemental whimsical conceits,—a strain intended to be especially suggestive of the great city's complex life.

Thus, groups of 'Gay ladies,' 'Gens d'armes,' 'Nursemaids' and 'Mariners of the Seine,' 'Blouses and Gamins of the Banlieu,' 'the "Reds" of Belleville and Montmartre,' 'Cocottes and Flaneurs of the Demi-monde,' and 'Bohemians of the Quartier Latin,' with 'Turcos,' 'Curassiers,' and 'Voltigeurs of the Guard,' and other 'Dashing Soldiers,' of the second Empire. They were raucous,—these pictures, and plausibly false—though titled and tagged as I have just told you; they set forth nothing but the outermost garb, englamoured by the lie of exaggeration; yet they were amazingly versatile and quick of execution, impish and catchy, and ridiculously clever.

And while the afternoon waned away, Frederick Horatio worked gamefully on, buried in the multiplication of those gaudy cartoons, which he pinned up to dry, as soon as

completed, on the walls around him.

And Constance sat in a corner, 'out of the way,' with her hands clasped over her knees, absorbed in her father's pictorial exploits, her youthful brow smooth and serene with hopeful satisfactions. Indeed, I hardly see myself, how things could have looked better, under the circumstances. So I drop the curtain on them in quiet approval.

CHAPTER XIV

PROEMIAL RIFTS AND PREMONITORY THUNDERS

It is recorded of the great Hannibal, when about to cross the Pyrenees for his invasion of Italy, that he sent back all those who had not proved themselves sufficiently brave in the precursory combats with the Spanish tribes, and although he lessened his forces thus by ten thousand men, he persuaded the remainder they were a host of invincible heroes.

In a similar spirit, and fired, we may hope, by this classic precedent, our principal, in his lofty soul, wrought a stern mastery over his weaker part, putting it behind him as though it were Satan, and proceeded to fortify himself, from centre to circumference, with the high-strung courage of an acrid despair.

Yes, our wise Horatio nicely weighed the conditions which should promise him success. For his good name

with its long string of etceteras, he had clearly a paramount duty to perform. For this opus magnum he must be steeled in his purposes and hardened for victory. Dame Fortune had confronted him with a crucial test, and he resolved to do battle with her, proudly and alone. Therefore, would he cast away craven expedient, and block the road to further retreat.

To this end, and duly sensible, I doubt not, of the wooings of his family life, he would 'clap a quietus' upon all things connubial. Domestic controls, uxorious endearments—should know him no more. He would flout Mrs Fledgef, and scoff at her sister, and his laboratory

henceforth should be his exclusive bed-chamber.

He would run up and down the celestial staircase in his dirty boots, course over the flowery glories spread out on the landing above, and grind his heels into that spick-andspan oilcloth laid down in the hall. He would box the children's ears all round, and set them howling one against the other. He would devour his meals, to himself, in the sacred parlour, toss his leavings on to the crimson carpet! and scrape his muddy boots on the 'turtle fender!' He would drive Grafton Budd out to work in the garden, right under his wife's window; set the housemaids to scouring the schoolroom, by heavens, it needed it badly enough, bully the 'Mary Janes' and give 'buttons' a hiding upon general principles. Ah! that he would. Yes, and with mad ingratitude, noncomprehensible, would feed poor Mollie Buttox's best pastry to the voracious Cæsar, and would lock up the cats in the larder, along with the meats and dainties. In brief, he would raise a pandemonium all round him, under the quaking old roof-tree of Waltonbury House, and if, by reason of these dare-devil brutalities or manly self assertions (what you will)—he should be storm-tossed and riven, lashed into froth by a hurricane The tempest of execrations, why, so much the better. might 'crack its cheeks' and he would be primed with the collective wrath of his whole household, in addition to a fury very properly his own, and should find it no difficult matter, these forces pent up within him, to assume a conquering eloquence, superb and complete, upon the occasion of his 'Discourse upon Paris,'—a potency that should sweep him clear of every peril, in his coming encounter with the folks of Waltonbury, and hoist him on to the pinnacle of their highest admiration!

To be sure it should. Why not?...

It is nine o'clock in the morning, upon the second day after his disastrous fight in the schoolroom, and factotum Ladlaw sits with the master in the keep of his laboratory. He had been summoned to the presence, and had come on the instant, as a faithful vassal should.

'I have not been sufficiently at liberty to send for you before, Mr Ladlaw,' the principal said, 'being all the time seriously engaged, as you observe,' waving his hand around him at his masterpieces pinned on the walls.

The usher's eyes rolled in his head, in deferential

approval.

You see, Mr Ladlaw, I got some rather nasty contusions while punishing those rascals the other day, and, er—I didn't want to subject myself to the witticisms which my appearance might have provoked amongst my pupils. Boys will be boys, you know, sir. Still, I am anxious now to hear from your own lips what took place after I left you, and, in fact, tell me everything seriatim, if you please; it is time I should know it.'

'Well, yes, Mr Fledger,' responded the proctor. 'I think it is, sir,—for if something very express is not taken in hand to avert it, I am afraid, Mr Fledger, that the school will go all to pieces.'

'Ah! yes,' broke in the principal. 'I know—that is—well proceed, Mr Ladlaw, giving me the facts, without your

opinions.'

Then with sententious humility, Septimus proceeded to recount to our great man all the hideous circumstances of the late revolt. It is true, he touched as lightly as he could upon the ludicrous display made by the harem-scarem school while galloping down the High Street, and the ribald reception accorded it, from 'start' to the 'finish,'—so anxious was he not to drive the principal into a panic of despair, for fear that worthy might close up the academy altogether, and as a sequent necessity—relieve his own sapient self from all further services and emoluments in the same. Nevertheless, with all his politic abatements, our Septimus couldn't help disclosing a condition of things

anent that scholarly institution, which master and usher alike felt to be signally serious, and the narrative concluded, they eyed each other dismally for several silent minutes, each one fencing with his own fears. Here was the fashion of it:—

A sable henchman, sitting stiffly erect,—a motionless automaton, with the springs run down; his right hand planted in the breast of his seedy, black, buttoned-up coat, his left in his lap; his parchment face enscrawled with furrowed blankness... and over against him, in a sprawling pose, a valiant pedagogue with a battle-brunted visage, deep in the dumps, his damaged fist reposing upon the table, the fingers of his other hand picking fretfully at the button-hole where should have hung his cane.

Master and minion thus pointedly contrasted: between them—a pair of watchful, grinning fire-dogs, one for each, brazenly strutting on the empty hearth. . . .

'Well,' said the master, at length, straightening up and blowing his nose, 'this won't do. We must take the bull by the horns, Ladlaw, we really must, if we don't want to give up altogether. Now, here's a draft of a circular, and a notice of a lecture I am about to deliver upon Paris. them down to Hinckley's and tell him to strike me off five hundred of each. I want him to do a neat thing with the circulars; cream paper, antique type, and the capitals in colours, tell him; but nothing ostentatious, mind. I can't bear that sort of thing. As for the posters, they'd better be on red paper, so as the people can see 'em. Tell Hinckley I give him carte blanche on the job, and to be as quick as he can about it. I've set the date of the lecture, a' week from to-day, which'll give me time to freshen up a bit,' caressing the abrasions on his face. 'So now listen to me, Ladlaw; when these bills arrive, I want you and Sheepshead to take 'em round; that's a job you can do in the evening, after school hours. Go all over the town thoroughly, mind, and don't shirk any of the big houses and villas. needn't pull your face any longer than it is already, Ladlaw; this little business will be a nice change for you, capital walking exercise, too, which I can tell by your appearance is what you need, sir, and, er—if there should be any unpleasantness with the servants, routing 'em out at dinnertime, and so forth, make Sheepshead do the dirty work; he

can't afford to be particular, and he knows it. Buttons can stick up the posters about the town, and carry 'em round to the shops, but you'll have to go with him or the damned little rascal 'll leave a hundred of 'em in a lump at one place.

'Of course, while this is pending, Ladlaw,' concluded the master, 'you must take my place in the schoolroom, and—er—keep a tight hand upon the teachers as well as the scholars, giving 'em all to understand that I have an important lecture in preparation, which will prevent me from being with them for the remainder of the week. That's all, for the present, Ladlaw, and if anything unusual should occur in the interim, come and tell me all about it; I think you comprehend me?'

'I believe I do, Mr Fledger,' replied the docile, dismal Septimus; and he arose, turned on his heel and noiselessly departed, leaving our great man to practise up for his vital dissertation, now sitting down to a jumble of notes from the Paris Handbook, then strutting about his sanctum, and treating his bottles and paraphernalia to various bursts of loud-mouthed eloquence; while flourishing his ferule in agile semi-circles around his head, as a balance, we may guess, to his malproportioned oratory, or clapping it on his cartoons, with recurrent zest, he would sweep his glances along the racks and shelves, as if he really looked for his jars to jingle there in vitreous acclamation. By-the-bye, when he waxes impatient at his own iterations, he drops into his chair for a ruminant spell; then, prompted by the other phase of his mania, sallies forth from his den, to cut the various capers of his formulary, as previously laid down; and a very delightful entertainment it proves, with everyone concerned; for the Susans and the Mary-Janes are snapping and snarling, and Grafton Budd is swearing under his breath, at the sudden discipline imposed upon them. The outraged children, their heads bumped together, are kicking up a chorus of howls; lancinated Bobby's gruesome melodies resound from kitchen to dormitory; sweet Angeletta's indignation bursts forth like a battery of field-guns masking a retreat; while the gentle Celestia's destructive fury matches a storm on 'the Bay of Biscay O!' as she shrieks in her good man's ears, claws his hair, smacks his face and hurtles him neck and crop out of her 'parlour,' mutton-chops, beer-bottles, dirty boots and all. Nevertheless, our remarkable Frederick, with his nostrils dilated, snuffs up the fury of the battle and actually revels in it! But, remember, this was the very torture he had laid himself out to bear; this was the discipline that should screw up his courage to the sticking point; this, the sort of music that should inspire his soul for the vaulting heroics of that great day, when he hoped to fix his clutches in the throat of calumny, beat down all opposition, and gallantly retrieve those glittering virtues which had always

been so properly his own.

Our glorious Frederick! Our Hector! And I may as well tell you that, for the rest of the week, when the master wasn't holding forth in the laboratory, touching up his pictures or scribbling more memoranda out of that *Paris* Handbook, he was snapping the bands of his domestic restraints, by tearing up and down in the venerable mansion, and purposely desecrating each sacred corner therein, with his brutish and scandalous violations. And when, after the consummation of some especially heinous atrocities, such as dropping a big bottle of ink in simulated heedlessness, while trespassing on the stair-carpet; pitching the broken fragments over the bannisters on to that oilcloth laid down in the hall and then rushing into the 'best parlour' to wipe his black fingers on the first antimacassar he could lay hold of; when, after such enormities as these, I say, he was summarily ejected from those hallowed precincts—by sheer force of vengeful numbers, whose units were armed on the spur of the moment, with a birch-broom, a toastingfork, a couple of pokers and a meat-jack, why, our gallant marauder would fall back upon his Fortalice—lock the door in the teeth of his adversaries, and snapping his fingers at their discomfiture, would catch up his silver ferule, and waving it serenely in the kindly chemic air, would go through his eloquent performances again, with all the vigour and aplomb of assured, prospective triumph.

Our superbly incomparable Fledger!

Meanwhile, in the dark passage outside, all unheeded by the master, his checkmated foes would deliver themselves in a totally different strain, while they thumped and kicked at the portal of that sturdy little study.

'Just hark at the old fool, now, Sis, he's gone raving mad!'

'That he has, Etty; whatever shall we do?'

'Hadn't I better run down to the police-station, mum? and tell 'em about it?' queried the impertinent Bobby, insinuating his tow-coloured crown between the sisters' elbows and casting up his artless visage, first to one and then to the other.

'You take my advice, Mrs Fledger, and send to the workus, dreckly, for a couple of strong men and a straight weskit,' squalled Mrs Buttox in her mistress's ear, 'or that man 'll end by murderin' the lot of us.'

'Very good advice, Mary, dear; and after that, if they can't get 'im up to bed, where he trewly belongs, they can clap 'im inter my old wheelbarra, and I'll trundle 'im off to the infirmary,' chimed in the resourceful Mr Budd.

'Much better let us cool un down with a pail or two of cold water,' muttered the vindictive Susans to the spiteful Mary-Janes; 'he's full o' the devil, that's all's the matter with 'im.'

To all these urgent counsels, the coy Celestia rendered not a word in reply. To be systematically defied by anyone like this, was a novelty to her. All her life long, she had never before encountered it. Were the heavens about to tail? Or what did it mean?

'The old brute' didn't seem to be afraid of her any longer. Perhaps he had gone crazy. Anyway, it was plain she had all her work cut out to conquer him.

She must have time to consider. So she ordered her menials back to their business, and betook herself to her bedroom, along with her sister.

CHAPTER XV

HIS WATERLOO

A TURGID week has worn itself away within the walls of dulce domum. Its garden spots have felt the hoof of stranger desecration, and the songs which have echoed under its venerable roof have not been madrigals, nor

dithyrambs of praise. There was conflict, malefaction, shrieking violence.

Still, let us not repine, for what is lost in one direction, is gained in another. If the flowery carpets have been spattered with ink and grease, the rugs and antimacassars in the parlour, ruined, and the turtle fender defiled with boot-scrapings; per contra—the schoolroom floors and windows have been washed clean, and the cobwebs wiped away. Nay, more, the maps and diagrams have been polished up, and the walls hung round with a great panoply of 'Paris pictures,' fresh wrought by the master's hand. Yes, indeed, for the discourse upon Paris superimpends. The teachers have swung open the hospitable doors, and are bowing to the goodly company in process of arrival, and they guide, admonish, and direct, as the populace pours in, and the hum and shuffle go steadily on.

Half an hour afterwards the guests are all seated.

It is three in the afternoon by the schoolroom clock, and Mr Fledger enters by the playground door, taking off his mortar-board with one hand and holding his silver ferule and a roll of papers in the other. He mounts the platform, bows to the people, and proceeds to climb proudly up into the repose of his arm-chair, while his auditory is busy with a buzz of expectation, for lo! 'tis 'the hour and the man' and this will be his climacteric. Oh, what springs of information are about to gush forth! what salvoes of impassioned oratory to thunder out of the bag-puckered mouth of our principal, tried and true.

Before he begins, let us cast a look round at the preparations and take stock of the assembly, not forgetting a final glance at our great man, 'ere his form loses its original brightness,' and the 'excess of his glory is obscured,' for this is the single opportunity offered us of seeing a gathering of Waltonbury folk, and—I hate to say it—the last chance we shall get of beholding the master in all his magnitude.

Well, then, by an arrangement customary at these diversions, the long, heavy desks have been shifted back in a semi-circle round the walls, a passage being left at intervals between them, and upon their sloping tops the scholars are expected to sustain themselves. The forms are set out in rows, across the room, and a reserved space, close under our preceptor's eye, is parted off with a crimson rope and

filled in with a medley of rout-seats, garden-lounges and chairs brought down from the house.

In front of all, the master's rostrum looms grandly up. The ponderous desk which crowned its centre, has been taken away, and the expanse which forms the tops of the cupboards is swept clear of the usual school stationery and playthings, and a green baize cloth enwraps the whole concern, hanging down in front, over the shabby lockers and thumb-smeared cupboard doors, affording an ample basis for a special display, and a splendid thumping-ground for

the master's nimble knuckles.

On this mighty table, to the right and left, sit several curiosities along with the tumbler and water jug; they are a plaster cast of a mongrel cathedral, purporting by label to be 'Nôtre Dame,' and another of the 'Invalides' or the 'Panthéon,' I don't know which, and it doesn't matter, the likeness being liberal enough to admit of either postulate. Our sprightly Fledger had bought these wonders of an Italian image-vendor, on coming back, by way of London, from his visit to Paris. He had laid them prudently away, down in the deeps of his laboratory cupboard, where they had rested ever since. But now he has unearthed them, scrubbed them clean and planted them upon that didactic baize, with lighted candles stuck inside, to show off the beauties of their coloured windows, (they were beautiful indeed), and ah—what can we gracefully call it—the alabastrine translucency of the plaster, to wit, the plaster of Paris, of which accordant material they are fabricated.

Beside these trophies reposes a yard of French bread, made out of canvas and cotton-batting and tinted of a truthful brown, and I needn't tell you it is the handiwork of

boulanger Frederick.

Then there are some figures in 'bisque,' pertly suggestive, and statuettes in plausible bronze,—coxcombical-martial or finnikin-amatory, and bright metal paper-weights, trinkets and nondescripts, of designs reprehensible or savagely absurd, with sundry other articles of virtu I need not particularise, except by interdicting any final E. A French rifle of the year '54, labelled as picked up inside the 'Malakoff,' coupled with a Russian bayonet, fished out of the same hell-kettle, a gens d'arme's hanger, hat and belt, and a shell off the battlefield of Solferino, completes the recherché collection, and should a shade of disappointment thereat becloud your countenance, my reader, I beg you to remember that, when our principal went to Paris on the 'hop, skip and jump,' he had no thoughts of discoursing publicly upon the adventures which should befall him there, and that these things were brought back for his own delectation and to excite the wonderments of his lady-love and the children.

Yet, only lift your eyes from those things on the table to the glorious spectacle displayed upon the wall behind it, and you'll flush rosy pink with delight, for there hang treasures manifold; rare gems of fancy overlaying fact. See! . . .

Once more the noble church of Nôtre Dame bravely supports the master's right; done to the life on a ten-foot sheet of paper, in richest purple, deepest black and densest brown, and set in a sunburst of liquid copper! Prodigious leaping buttresses fling themselves wildly about the grand old fane. Grim rows of kings frown down upon you, from its front. Above them is a cart-wheel window, alive with blazing glass. High over all, those inky towers climb peerlessly into the burning sky; and crockets and finials exhibit themselves in a maze of dancing fretwork. This monument of beauty deliriously repeats itself in the bland blue river: while two or three poplars, standing black upon the hither bank, and a flight of crows athwart the glowing sky, make up the total of the wondrous picture. To the right and left, are several additional views of that favoured scene, considerately given you at divers distances and angles. are other notable pieces.

One is a picture fifteen feet long, entitled 'the Façade of the Tuileries'; a most masterful conception this. A mass of brown building multiplied by nine: the Pavilon de L'Horloge frowning up black and gigantic in the centre. The sky from zenith to horizon is of a densely brilliant blue; and behold! in the foreground—the Emperor, Louis Napoleon, with his generals, reviewing a splendid assortment of soldiery; their flags unfurled to the breeze, and a pretty stiff breeze too, judging by the stiffness of the flags; horses are prancing, officers waving their swords, and cannon going off everywhere, in a nimbus of flame and smoke.

On the other side of the platform, by a natural necessity,

is a complementary painting of the Louvre; and oh! the marvellous grandeur of that work of art! It is a picture of columns and columns; endless columns, surmounted with capitals and friezes, entablatures and pediments ad infinitum. Rows and rows of stately windows alternate beneath, and wide-spreading flights of monumental steps spread out an interminable base. He has touched up the capitals with gold leaf, to add to the magic of the imagery, and as an earnest of the gilding to be told of in the interior. Mr Fledger, you understand, not taking kindly to interiors; for he finds when he attempts them, that he gets jumbled up in the details and lost in the perspectives.

I must tell you, however, in this connexion, that our master had been greatly impressed by the interior of the 'Invalides,' as being, I presume, more exclusively of that theatrical character which would strike a sympathetic chord in his own altiloquent nature, albeit of a strain infinitely more cogent than anything he could lay claim

Accordingly, during the five fast and furious days he had been sketching and splashing and gumming together, in his laboratory, the memories of that Imperial Sepulchre turned themselves over and over in his brain, prompting him to put them upon paper. The vaulted cupola, with its blaze of light above; the sombre walls; the massive marble parapet, surrounding the solemn, open vault, beneath; those twelve great statues of the 'Victories,' frowning down into the awesome depth; and those groups of standards, wrested Below, in central isolation, the great sarcofrom the foe. phagus of Napoleon.

How he had tried to set forth something of all this solemn majesty! With soulful sweeps of the vain though nimble pencil; with splotches, slaps, and curlycues; with all the limber hocus-pocus of his facile brushes—adventured he the crucial task; yet all to no purpose; his darling inspirations would not materialise.

Sheet after sheet of paper, broad and blank to glorious possibilities, he ravaged and spoilt with his wild experiments. Plain to himself, at last, was the futility of his attempts. He saw the thing was not to be done by sleightof-hand and therefore in his case, not to be accomplished at all. So he gave it up, threw himself down in his chair,

and gnawed his nails for a couple of hours at the thoughts of his utter discomfiture.

Afterwards, however, when he tried an exterior view of the august building, he was able to please himself better; so he gives us, you see, a charming creation, in purple and fine gold, set in a sky of tenderest pink; and at the corners, little abortive pencilled profiles of those great statues inside, for, confound the statues, he couldn't let them alone.

Still another great piece is the 'Place de la Concorde'; and this is spread out, concordantly high in the centre, above the whole collection, that it may blend its lucid harmonies, I doubt not, with the quietudes beneath. 'Tis a study in yellow, white and blue, that is truly gorgeous. Ah! those statues of liquid amber; those sweeping terraces and flights of steps; those urns and vases too, all of the same exquisite material; and ah! the delirious beauty of those grand fountains, spouting up their sparkling waters, far into the empyrean! About the bottom of this picture, are dotted little groups of Paris lilliputians, to show up the magnitude of everything by diminutive contrast, and too comfortably small to manifest any surprise thereat.

Underneath all this is a scrumptious 'Column of July,' done in bronze paint and shaded off in black, to make it look real, which it certainly does,—real enough, in fact, to cut a hole in the wall. Groups of impish figures surround this picture; students, dancers, court ladies, and marshals of France; soldiers, flower-girls, blouses, rag-gatherers with long wicker baskets on their backs, and little street arabs, with naked brown limbs and African faces, and those

jackals of the gutter are quite cleverly sketched.

The last of these great productions is a huge and fervid effusion which our master calls 'The Jardin des Plantes,' and in this picture the effects are simply astounding. Masses of rabid, tropical vegetation spring up, and turn about in every direction. 'Tis a riot of reds and greens, blues, purples, browns and yellows, and goes to represent, in its complex entirety, the luxurious flora of that heavenly spot. Starting out of the midst of the tangle, are plentiful, nondescript, fairy buildings, in lavender and white, sunglinted with gold-leaf; while in the background, museums, conservatories and zoological courts contribute their varied splendours to the enchanting scene.

Mr Fledger is an extraordinary man.

Besides this signal effusion, there are a variety of character sketches—made to piece in the awkward spaces of all the glorious show. Let us glance at two or three. Here is 'a greasy concierge at a porte cochère,' a bunch of keys hangs from his waist, half as big as his head—and a dirty apron clings all around him, and there—is a 'slippered garçon,' with a towel over his elbow, a basin of frogs in one hand and a yard of bread in the other, on the rush to serve his customers.

Quite in a central place is a piquant little 'cantinière,' decked in a blue zouave jacket, braided with gold. A tasselled crimson fez is cocked all agog on her head, and her frizzy black hair streams far out behind her. She's scanty of skirt, but has plenty of limb, and she flourishes a cigarette in her outstretched hand, while she claps the other on that little barrel at her hip, which is hanging from her shoulder by a glittering belt. She pouts you a kiss with her ruby lips, this 'daughter of the regiment,' so dashing and chic, and she's so piquantly gracious that you may invest her with every charm you please—excepting that of native modesty.

Lastly there is the 'guide, philosopher and friend' qui avait le plaisir of introducing our schoolmaster to a few of the more special blandishments of the gay metropolis,—and with what gusto would our naughty pedagogue have aired to a special few, the salacious mysteries this grinning mercenary had revealed to him, in the course of a disreputable and short afternoon. The loathsome herdings in the drinking-shops, the pleasantries, most various, of the Banlieu and that nude and dalliant family of Venuses he had encountered in a secret salon, right at the city's core. Fledger must have had a penchant for this sort of people, for he gets this fellow's points to a nicety; so a pasty-skinned panderer with a vulture's beak, shaggy brows, steel-grey eyes, and a bushy moustache, looks craftily out at us, in the master's full-length presentment, and this atrabilious, slimy knave, hat in hand, gives us his dutiful congé, as we hastily turn our backs upon him.

Now for the audience brought together by Mr Fledger's flamboyant appeals. It is, you see, quite a notable gathering and so large a one that many of the late comers have to stand—in default of sitting room.

Now first, on the select side of that crimson cordon, we notice a galaxy of Waltonbury's primest. They are

magnates from the Abbey.

That benevolent old gentleman with the polished brow, warm complexion, silvery hair and fluffy, white whiskers, is no less a personage than the Venerable Archdeacon Chasuble, and the austere lady at his side, an it please you, is the venerable Archdeaconess. They are flanked, right and left, with divers dignified members of their family, and they all exhale an atmosphere of kindly importance as they look around them. Seated close behind them are Canons Chantsill and Beauclerk, elderly men of scholarly deportment and irreproachable sanctity.

That bland and bald-headed individual, with the monocle at his eye, is the rector of fashionable St Mark's and the pale, astute and handsome lady beside him is that rector's wife; they are the Rev. Antonio Buttersquire and Mrs Buttersquire—and on the same seat, and it is far too lowly a one for so lofty a personage, sits Dr Smart, I beg his pardon, Serebrum Sinus Smart, M.D., a medico of great perspicacity

and indubitable skill.

Prominent in the next row are the Misses Grimjaw, who conduct the 'young ladies' seminary,' and they are accompanied by a select few of the 'young ladies' themselves. Those Grimjaws are elderly, stately, stiff and fashionable—three in number and one in potency, and those selected young ladies are handsome, proud and of touchme-not propriety. Next to this important group sits an armiger of especial mould, and why they haven't provided him with a crimson cushion, or some other comforting distinguishment, I am at a loss to explain. 'Tis an unpardonable oversight, for this is Count Skinner Pettigrew,—a pompous, goggled-eyed, gold-spectacled little man with a 'lean and hungry look.'

Once upon a time, it is whispered, by the quidnuncs of Waltonbury, this present grandee was quite 'a small potato,'—a burn-bailiff and collector of debts, but through a fortuitous marriage connection he got appointed as a supernumerary on some foreign commission—to Montenegro—they think it was; and the sovereign of that country was so delighted with the commissioners' labours, that he showered titles upon them indiscriminately—and Pettigrew was made a count.

When he came back to his native town, he found himself regarded as a great man, his social credits having gone before him; so he proceeded to construe himself to his townspeople accordingly. That was years ago, but his strength has augmented since, along with the tale of his days, and now—he is a poor-law guardian, a trustee of the savings bank, and a captain in the volunteers.

In politics, he is of the Liberal-Conservative shade, 'running with the hare and holding with the hounds,' and is an advocate, amongst the farmers, of 'compensation for

unexhausted improvements.'

He is going to contest the borough with that grizzly oldtimer, Sir Monkhouse Merriman, and he hopes to be high sheriff all in good time.

He makes a point of appearing at every public function held in the country-side; and a meeting or a lecture must be a paltry thing indeed, which is not graced with his con-

descending presence.

Near to this dandyprat sits Eccleson Tunny, the wine and spirit merchant, who, though not a man of refinement, is a bulky fellow at the bank—a town councillor, and a quondam mayor of Waltonbury. Of course, they dub him esquire. His dashing wife and stylish children sit beside him, all attired in the very lastest London—hah! what am I saying?—Paris fashions

That elderly gentleman, stooping and grey, is the crack solicitor of Waltonbury, Lawton Bumper, Esquire—a genuine esquire this time. His son met with a shocking death, some time ago, in the hunting-field, and they say his father has never recovered from it. Wherefore I marvel at seeing Lawton Bumper, Esquire, at this meeting, and I hazard the opinion—that nothing but the magic persuasiveness of Mr Fledger's cream-laid circular could have lured him out of

his fastness at Birley Grange.

Then there is Ralph Prescott, the editor and proprietor of the Waltonbury Chronicle and Bedbridge County Gazette. An erect and stalwart man is he, with a fine head of curly brown hair and a handsome face. He is an accomplished journalist and a social success. Several members of his family accompany him. In the body of the room, among many others who invite our attention, is that worthy linendraper-Mr Timothy Clipfarthing, red-faced, pock-marked,

jolly and loquacious, with his partner, Silas Yardley, who is dark, lean, vulpine and laconic, but a devil at a handshake, when it comes to that.

Messrs Mixer and Packingham, the grocers, have also put in an appearance. They own a big shop in the High Street, and a couple of fine residences in the London Road. They are very horsey, and their turnouts are considered the best in town. There are other notables, too, of their class, who must consent to be nameless.

Further back in the room are squeezed a goodly company of the plainer sort. Sagacious, simple, rough-and-ready—portly, grave and gay. They're a sample of the yeomanry of England, and their buxom wives and daughters accompany them. The sturdy scions of men like these—whirl the wheels of industry, plough the mains of commerce, and setting foot on distant shores, make patient conquests there. Indomitable is their native force, secure—their cherished freedom.

In the front ranks of these people sit the parents of those senior boys,—Braddington, Percival and Pukeley, along with Aldermaston's frail mamma; while those young gentlemen themselves, so lately driven forth from the academy, with every circumstance of violence and reproach, are actually ensconced, along with their fathers and mothers, in the midst of the crowd, and each one has a lank and peculiar parcel in his lap, some peace offering, no doubt, to be tendered to their preceptor at the proper time; and what large-hearted forgiveness this is, both as to the parents and their dutiful sons. Very creditable, indeed. And yet, I wonder, does Mr Fledger look upon these particular visitors as birds of evil omen? It is just possible he does, however groundless his fears may be.

Around the back of the room is that horseshoe row of scholars, perched upon the desks, with their chins on their knees and their hands sprawling about each other's shoulders or locked in front of their prominent shins. The teachers are posed upon their high stools, stork-like, behind them, while three peculiar and extrinsic visitors, jumbled into the farthest corner, impart an unusual variety to the comprehensive assembly.

The first of these is a decayed and 'respectable' party, by the name of Swallow; to be courteously particular, Erasmus Swallow, a surname withal, of cruel irony, for

though his thin and quivering lips may once have smacked with the good things of gastronomy, he looks now as though he hadn't swallowed anything nourishing for many a long day. Weasen-faced and bloodless, small, cadaverous and bony, this pathetic mortal is clad in a seedy, bottle-green frock-coat, which was black once upon a time. Of a famished and bygone blackness, also, are the patched and puckered kid gloves which encase his hands. His sallow white shirt-front is broad and deep, and is enlivened with three black studs. His stand-up collar, as stiff as a plough-share, reaches to his ears, and is girded by a huge, thread-bare, black satin stock. He holds his ancient, well-brushed chimney-pot hat out in front of him, as though it were a basin of hot soup, and he twitches his fragile nostrils and blinks his restless, watery eyes, incessantly.

Mr Erasmus Swallow, in years gone by, was a respectable bookseller and stationer, of St Agnew's Butts, in Waltonbury. If you entered his shop to buy a paper or magazine, one remark of his would lead to another, and spreading out his prong-like fingers upon the counter, he would discourse to you, quite learnedly, upon the niceties of the printer's art, and lead you insensibly on into a maze of intricate bookery, ancient and modern; black-letter Bibles and illuminated manuscripts; the 'Classics' from the Oxford Press and the 'Aldine' editions of the poets; mingled with snatches from Spenser, Milton or Shakespeare. He was respectful and humble, as well as erudite; and were you never in so great a hurry, you hadn't the heart to speak abruptly to him. On the shelves behind him reposed numerous rows of learned books, which he never could sellcommentaries, treatises and what not; and as he stood and talked with you, he seemed to be the veritable creature of their enunciation. In his well-ordered home he was blest with an irreproachable wife and some 'very nice children,' and, as the story goes, had 'respectable connexions.' But his poor wife had long since unwound her mortal coil and withdrawn to the land of shadows; and his children had followed suit by instalments, as soon as they decently could. Then our hapless little bookseller's respectable business, along with his respectable friends, melted decorously away, and he was, in due time, ejected from the home of his hardships and sorrows. Yet, for all these disasters, his ingrained

respectability never forsook him, and he fruitlessly endeavoured to obtain some respectable employment, being totally unfitted for that manual labour which was the only work that was offered. So he returned with touching lealty to his life-long profession, and fitted him up a portable counter, with a glass top, which he filled with a miniature stock of stationers' wares in orderly array. With this respectable thing hanging in front of him, held to his shoulders by a decorous strap, and a 'Sairey Gamp' umbrella dangling from a loop at his button-hole, he plodded every day about the streets of Waltonbury and the neighbouring towns, and still continues to plod, attired always in that self-same suit of black, which he had first put on for his wife's funeral, and calling out, with clock-like regularity, a decent and dirgelike refrain, in words like these,—

'Note paper, penny half quire. 'Memorandum books, a penny.

'Half a dozen pens and a bottle of ink, a penny.

"Old Moore's Weather Almanack" for this year, one penny."

Thus he goes on, from morn till eve, from season to season, year in and year out, seemingly impervious to the weather, being altogether too kipper and grievous to be taken with anything worse than a 'snivelly cold.' To hunger and privation he is not a stranger, but he is dried up and shrivelled to the heart's core, and his life is too numb for. active suffering. Patiently he trends towards his merciful end; 'too proud to beg, too honest to steal.' At night he lays him down on an old camp bedstead, its webbing for his only mattress, in a wretched garret in the back streets; and he eats his sandwich or his 'snack' of bread and cheese while tramping along the country roads, and calls for his poor little 'half a pint of ale' at some quiet road-side inn. of these days, they'll find him dead in his tracks, for he is only a frail morsel of humanity, hovering on the borders of the great Beyond. Then, if they don't find enough money on him to bury him respectably, they'll give him a 'parish funeral' the reverse of respectable, and lay him away in the potter's field. Poor fellow! may he awake in a world of benevolent justice. May the guerdon of beneficent peace, with his loved ones near him, be the Divine per contra to his piteous fortunes and his broken heart.

Our second person singular is a creature of exceptional parts, a damsel she, of finished maturity (I should say about fifty), whose ripeness merges on the deliquescent. 'Tis a gaunt kind of scarecrow, tricked out in a ragged old Indian shawl—the gift of her father years before, when he came home from Calcutta. A greasy, fantastic, black-beaded old bonnet is slouched all awry upon her iron-grey head. She has a sloping forehead, big, vacuous eyes, a bottle nose, a pendulous chin, and a saddle-coloured complexion. She's inquisitive and credulous, shameless and vain, and, I need hardly say, half-witted.

The matrimonial markets of long ago had no use for her virgin charms, so she lived with her widowed mother for many years; and when that grievous ancient died, she left her lone daughter 'what little there was,' to wit, a very little income and a very little home, situated in the outskirts of the town. There she dwells in solitude, and whimsically ministers to her loneliness—a harmless, poor soul, and one

to be pitied. Her name is Felicity Beardmore.

Our last notability, but assuredly not our least, is bouncing Sergeant M'Nab, a recruiting officer for 'Her Majesty's army,' with permanent quarters at Waltonbury; and a splendid figure of a man he is. His coat of blazing scarlet fits him like a skin. Those bosses in front of his close-cut collar show that he belongs to the Grenadier Guards; and his bold, brown face, shrewd, grey eyes, short, thick beard, broad and padded chest, with crimson scarf draped over it to a knot at his sword-belt, sufficiently proclaim him a soldier indeed. He's a brave-looking fellow, though, and as brave as he looks, although he belongs to the 'soldiers of Birdcage Walk.' He wears on his breast a whole row of medals, and chief of all—the Victoria Cross.

¹ Prior to the war in the Crimea, the opinion was often expressed in London that the regiments of the Queen's household (the Grenadier, Coldstream and Fusilier Guards) were too tenderly nurtured to make good fighters, and they were often spoken of as 'Feather-bed soldiers,' and 'the soldiers of Birdcage Walk,' in allusion to their daily parades in that vicinity, and the easy character of their duties. This opinion of their prowess was proved utterly erroneous in the fights in which they were subsequently engaged, and notably at the battle of Inkermann, where, although taken by surprise, the 'Brigade of Guards' repelled, at an enormous loss, the repeated assaults of a large Russian army, and saved the British position.

On the misty slopes of Inkermann, that chill November morning, he had stood in his shirt-sleeves, along with his comrades, while the Russians surged up beneath like a vague, wavy cloud, and the most he could see was the glint of their bayonets, though the thunder of battle roared in his ears. Hour after hour he had braced himself to his work, begrimed with his cartridge-grease and the smoke of his The grip of his musket was burning hot, while the bullets whistled around him, and men toppled over with a shout or a groan; while the blood trickled down from a hole in his arm, and the hillside got slippery with British gore. He had wintered in the trenches before Sebastopol, yet came home unbroken at the close of the war. He was a braw Scot was Sergeant M'Nab, and when they were shipping troops off to the Indian Mutiny, he exchanged for active service into the 93rd Highlanders. So he sweltered and marched under a tropical sun, and was slashed across the head with a yataghan, at the deadly breach of the Secundra Bagh, in the first assault upon Lucknow.

He shook hands with Kavanagh, that hero supreme; fought fiercely at Cawnpore, and again at Lucknow. Returning home after all this, he managed to get back to the residue of his former comrades in the Guards, and to fat rations and St James's. A canny Scotchman, you see, was Sergeant M'Nab. After a while they put him at recruiting, and sent him down to Waltonbury, and his lines since then have fallen in pleasant places, for he's a gentleman with the innkeepers and a lion at the 'bar.' Can't you fancy him marching down High Street, as clean as a new pin, his boots black and shiny, a smart cane in his hand, and a bunch of bright ribbons in his jaunty cap,—this cockatoo gamecock seeking his prey?

Young Barney, out of work and fresh off the farm, stands and chats with our sergeant at the street-corner, admiringly

—hankering for soldierhood.

'Want to enlist?' says the sergeant, slapping the boy's back. 'Of course ye do; nothing more natural—a tall, bright, young fellow like you' (Barney's tall enough in all conscience, but his brilliancy is not remarkable). 'Now what shall it be? I can book you for anything, ye know. Here, look! here's all o' the splendid Service,'—and he un-

rolls one of Ackermann's coloured prints of the British army (a picture he often carries about with him, tucked under his arm), and descants to Barney upon the beauties and braveries therein depicted. 'Now you come along in here,' says he, taking hold of Barney's arm, 'and I'll tell ye a thing or two, that ye may depend on,' and they edge their way into a back parlour of the 'Bull and Beer-bottle,' and sit themselves down to a copious lush. Barney gets fuddled and fooled, grows maudlin-sentimental, and takes the 'Queen's shilling' so artfully proffered him. Then he thumps the pot-house table with his fist, shouts himself a 'soldier' with much mellow oratory, and proceeds to fill up with gratuitous potations. When he gets to his last notch and rolls off his chair, M'Nab and the barman lay him on a back bench 'to sleep it off,' and the sergeant repairs to the tap-room to smoke the pipe of satisfaction. Next day, that lowly young recruit has a 'high old time'—ribbons in his hat and money in his pocket—and he tramps about town cheerily drunk, joking and dancing and treating his friends, and the sergeant looks on and chuckles at his quarry, giving him plenty of tether; and so matters proceed, till, one fine morning, he wakes up to business, does Mr M'Nab, and bundles off Barney to Aldershot camp, booked for the 'finest regiment in the British army,' to wit, the 444th Buffs-pleasantly known as the 'Bedbridge Yellowbellies'—in company with several other Barnies, in charge of Corporal Hooker, who is sent down at intervals to 'bring 'em away.'

They put the poor yokel in the 'awkward squad,' and rap his toes and knuckles until they're black and blue; and for weeks and weeks his big ears tingle with the peremptory shouts of the rough drill-sergeant, who is licking him into 'Eyes front! Attention! Dress by your right, man! Left foot forward! March! . . . Left! Right! Left! Right! . . . A little quicker—a little quicker. Halt! Now over again. Left!... Left!... Left!'.... and so on, and we see nothing more of Barney excepting on high days and holidays, when he comes down to Waltonbury on leave. Now he's straight-backed, cockish and They've licked him into shape at last, and stamped him all over with the marks of a soldier; and he stalks about the town with showy condescension, a cigar for his pal and a leer for the girls, and has a rousing good time of it until he goes back to camp.

Sequacious, mettlesome, opportune Barnies, what should we do without you, or the gab-gifted gallants who coggle

the prey?

So Sergeant M'Nab, of many battles and eke of fruitful ambuscades, whips off his cap and stands to his corner, with his sharp ear cocked at 'attention' for our master's discourse. He's the last to come in, and the doors are closed, for Mr Fledger's schoolroom will hold no more.

'Tis a very great gathering, as you very well see. May the entertainment surpass its great expectations; and I think

it will. . . .

Behold, the principal is astir in his arm-chair, shaking off his airs and graces. He sits erect and blows his nose into a splendid, brand-new, red and buff silk handkerchief,—a piece of goods which was handed across the counter to Conny early this morning by Mr Clipfarthing himself, in exchange for the paternal florin.

Now he rises to his feet, unrolls his memoranda, and flattens them out nicely on the table before him. We see at a glance that the master has got himself up most carefully for this occasion in his best-frilled shirt and Sunday togs. He has given his snowy shirt-bosom a few artistic creases, so as to appear careless and professor-like, and his liberal shirt wristbands envelop his hands and generously swathe the scratches on his knuckles. His whiskers, too, are newly clipped (mutton-chop style), and his upstanding, wellbrushed, recurvient mane glistens with plentiful pomatum. A black, watered-silk ribbon, with a gold catch at the buttonhole, is his modest but most respectable watch-guard, and his faultless cravat came straight from the haberdashers to encircle his formidable collar. His face, considering the plight it was in only a week ago, is surprisingly creditable, that indefatigable Conny, with her warm water and cold cream, having wrought wonders upon it, and, excepting for two furtive patches of plaster nestling in the borders of his whiskers (and their presence might well be set down to careless shaving), you would never have believed it had been so badly disfigured a few days before. It is true, that mole on his brow had shown a very puffedup and angry spirit; and no wonder, poor thing! for it had been nearly torn off his face by the 'wipes' administered to it; but Conny has managed to doctor it down to an ordinary seeming, so that altogether the principal's countenance is fully up to par—hooky nose, bag-strung mouth, protruding lip, and everything; and it has, besides, a delicate whisky-flush, worked up from his hastily-warmed vitals, which makes him look quite robust, and is admirably suited to his present situation.

Well, our old inimitable pours out a glass of water and drinks it off with fine decision, wipes his mouth, blows his serviceable nose again, clears his throat, smiles sweet confidence upon the collective gaze, and, bowing impressively,

launches forth,-

'Ladies and gentlemen, I beg to assure you this is the proudest moment of my life. I see before me quite a concourse of respected names—names which belong to the very highest society in this town' (bowing obsequiously to the front row), 'and—er—I make bold to say that the very cream of Waltonbury, its quality, its intelligence and its beauty is crowded into these rooms this afternoon' (making another unctuous and sweeping obeisance to the ladies). 'And although I may not be wanting in some few poor attainments' (true to the letter, Fledge), 'I should not deem myself equal to the task of addressing so distinguished an auditory, if your presence here this afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, did not assure me most unmistakably that you consider me capable of affording you some instruction upon the interesting subject I shall have the happiness to place I will say, however, that I have felt it incumbefore you. bent upon me to make the very best efforts I was capable of to entertain you; and—er—I trust those endeavours will not be found unworthy of your kind attention,' waving his hand, first on the one side and then on the other, at the scenic glories spread around him, and bringing it down with a flourish on the table, behind his Paris trinkets and plaster-

'Now I presume, ladies and gentlemen, that we are none of us unconcerned at the doings of our neighbours across the Channel,—the more especially as we have lately deemed it necessary, in reply to certain ill-advised threats levelled at us from French military circles, to call together a large

and gallant army of rifle volunteers—England's citizen soldiery—in which we all have the greatest pride and confidence.' At this a few lumbering cheers came up from the back of the room. 'Yet I am persuaded that the great French nation has no intention of going to war with England; and we must all hope, indeed, that the amity and goodwill that has subsisted between the two countries since we fought the Russians side by side in the Crimea, will continue to grow into that perfect sympathy and good fellowship that must render a war between us—er—simply impossible.'

Our orator is now treated to a desultory clatter of sticks and heels all over the floor.

'Ahem!—I am happy to find that I have expressed the sense of this meeting, and I will venture further to say that it should become us to have regard for the many—er—engaging qualities of the French people, to study their scenery, their architecture, amusements, peculiarities and—er—so forth, as particularly exemplified in the great and charming city of Paris.

'Ladies and gentlemen, it is then with intentions like this that I shall endeavour to place before you this afternoon a few reminiscences which I brought home with me from the French capital, last Fall, and I sincerely hope that this resumé of my experiences will prove acceptable to you.'

Our great man pauses; he has made a nice beginning, so he looks graciously round once more, gulps down another tumbler of water (that whisky has made him confoundedly thirsty), mops his mouth, blows his good old stand-by of a nose, turns over his notes, clears his throat, and without further ado throws himself heart and soul into the business before him.

We will not follow the master too closely in his manifold expatiations, lest he should smother us with the swooping multitudes of his 'memorabilia' or lift us off our feet with his experimental French, or sweep us away altogether under the mighty torrent of his eloquence. . . . But he went on to expound to them all, in splendid bravura, the incidents of his journey down to Folkestone, and his qualmy trip across the Channel, and descanted upon the 'English colony of half-pay officers, and decayed fashionables living "on the cheap" at Boulogne.' Then he bounded off in a

vivid account of his night journey to Paris, his arrival there, his lodgings and his meals in the Rue de Rivoli, and his gallopings over the city to take in all the sights. He dilated rapturously upon everything he had seen. Nôtre Dame Cathedral, of course, in all its majesty, and the beauties and relics of the Sainte Chapelle.

The chaste Panthéon, the sombre Madeleine, the matchless Invalides, the wondrous palaces and gilded halls, the miles of stately picture-galleries, the vast open squares, the statues, the fountains, the new 'Haussman Boulevards,' and the sumptuous gardens everywhere; each and all received unstinted praise, enriched, meanwhile, by many a pointed allusion with his silver ferule to the gorgeous cartoons behind him. After this, and a water-gulping, nose-trumpeting intermission, he poured forth again a stream of wordy luxuriance in praise of the Emperor Napoleon and the Empress Eugenie, the gilded nobility of their magnificent Court, and 'the gay and dashing equipages in endless concourse' he saw in the Bois de Boulogne; the all abounding soldiery, the appulse of arms and the tinsel of war, the pageants in the parks and the reviews in the Champs de Mars.

And the simpletons at that meeting rolled up their eyes to the ceiling, while others, who had gone over the ground, and these were more numerous than Fledger suspected, rolled their eyes at one another and twisted their tongues in their cheeks, in deprecation of unseemly merriment. Well, our pedagogue having got thus far with apparent success, now lost his head in the fulness of his heart, and swung off into a spicy pasquinade upon the Quartier Latin—its côteries, clubs and dance-halls, and essayed to carry his audience with him into the midst of the 'Great Unwashed'-to 'black and ugly Belleville' and the precincts of Montmartre-in certain audacious suggestions of what he saw there. His hints were very broad, and they might have expanded considerably further, so eager was he, not counting the costs, to achieve a howling success, when ominous mutterings of disapproval from the major portion of his hearers, brought him back to his senses, and warned him not to toy with the skirts of propriety. You would have thought that no such reminder would have been necessary, but our Fledge was, at his best, licentious in thought and callous in feeling,

and that dedalian screen he held up before him was not always dense enough to mask the meretricious principle

chafing behind it.

Avoiding this quagmire, however, at the behests of his auditory; also beginning to feel that he had pumped himself dry; perceiving, too, by the schoolroom clock, that he had been holding forth for two hours, and that he had talked his 'quality' listeners into the fidgets, our great man wisely concluded to gather up the tangle of his discourse in a grand peroration, and this thrilling piece of eloquence, embodying as it did the acme of his genius, and the finality of his resources, had better be given you verbatim.

'And now, ladies and gentlemen,' said he, after a pause that was intended to be impressive, and wiping his brow with his dank and crumpled handkerchief,—convenient no longer for nasal exercises, 'I will venture to make a few parting observations, and draw my lecture to a close. I have given you, I trust, a fair outline of the French capital, its buildings and its people, and these illustrations and character sketches of mine,' waving his hand to the rear, 'have, I hope, been also instrumental in further elucidation of the subject—a subject, ladies and gentlemen, I have by no means. exhausted, for Paris is an incomparable city, surpassingly magnificent and unboundedly beautiful. Its skies and its people are happy, warm, and sunny, and they seem to hold perpetual holiday there, which is delightfully captivating and seductive-er-very much so; and they all possess a cleverness and an elegance quite superior to anything that can be found in England; well, I mean to say, to be found amongst certain inferior classes in England, and it is wonderful to think how that little streak of ocean is all that divides these two nations, so utterly unlike; and I haven't a doubt had that strip of blue water been absent throughout past ages, that the two countries would now be one. Yes, one great Empire, their languages one, their governments one, and er—the people one. All blended together into a great compact which would astonish the earth,' and he shook his forefinger high towards heaven; 'no misunderstandings, no differences, no jealousies, and of course—no hostilities, and this happy coalition would have marched perpetually forward, conquering and to conquer; and no other nation or body

of nations would have dared to withstand them. Ah, that would have been an Anglo-French alliance, indeed.¹ And I firmly believe, as I said just now, that nothing but that little strip of channel has stood in the way of so splendid a consummation,' and our magnaminous principal brought his fist down with a swing upon the table, and was rewarded with a persistent heel-thumping all over the room, also with ironical cheers, which he mistook for applause.

Meanwhile his silver ferule, only released from duty a few moments before, was set a-rolling on the unlevel baize by the master's mighty thwack, and dropped ominously off

the table at the archdeacon's feet.

'And, moreover, I will make bold to say this,' continued our orator, 'let us learn by heart some lessons from the French people. Let us study to be gay and cheerful, like them. Let us make our public buildings, parks, squares, and gardens as beautiful as they do—with gildings and frescoes, tapestries, statues, arabesques, fountains, conservatories. flowers, and so forth. Why, look here, even these little things I have on this table '-taking up a delaissé figure, all hips and elbows—'even such a little thing as this'—turning it about in his hands—'are most artistically conceived and expressed, and although the subjects might be-er-a little free, according to our insular ideas, still let us make allowance for this, and be en rapport with our neighbours across the water; while we trust that they, too, will learn those serious aspects of life which are so proper to us, and indeed, all the dignity and virtue of the English character, which so strongly marks our native land.'

More thumpings and clappings, this time from the back of the room, qualified by a few sibillations of dissent from the front rows, the significance of which is not unnoticed

by the master.

'But let me say in conclusion, and say it very proudly,' our preceptor went on, 'these two or three notable things—' planting one forefinger deliberately upon the other—'that although in France they have a fine Catholic hierarchy, they cannot compare with the unimpeachable excellence,

¹ A good deal of intermittent nonsense had been talked after the Great Exhibition of '51, and at the close of the Crimean War, as to the advantages of an Anglo-French alliance.

learning and dignity of the prelates of our Established Church of England.'

The venerable Archdeacon Chasuble here exchanged painful smiles with Canons Chantsill and Beauclerk, while the Rev. Antonio Buttersquire simpered doubtfully at Mrs Buttersquire. 'Also, that the women of France, however beautiful and seductive they may be, and in point of fact, are, can by no means equal the loveliness of Britain's fair A sharp 'hear, hear' from Count Skinner daughters.' Pettigrew—in gallant interest of the ladies present. 'And although the scientific attainments of the French people chemical, surgical, medical and otherwise—are truly remarkable, yet they cannot boast of a Faraday, a Cooper, a Harvey, a Bell, or a Jenner.' Sharp and solitary raps on the floor with Dr Smart's gold-headed cane. 'In the domains of jurisprudence, too, though undeniably forensic and acute, they cannot point to a Brougham, a Blackstone or a-er-Coke upon Littleton.' The last example was a little tame, but it was all he could think of, so it had to pass muster, and Lawton Bumper raised his head a few inches and smiled sardonically.

'In journalistic work, too, it cannot be disputed, they are far behind us,'—a pleasant murmur of assent escaped the handsome lips of Ralph Prescott—'whilst in the general fields of literature, though it is true they often score a great success, it is likewise certain that we immeasurably surpass them.' A tremulous cry of assent from Erasmus Swallow. 'And although French politeness is deservedly proverbial, and is indeed so natural to them that even the little boys and girls are courteous to their seniors'—a piping squall of satisfaction from Miss Felicity Beardmore—'yet I must confess, there are no ladies in France or anywhere else—like a true English lady, whether she be an aristocrat or—a—er—daughter of the people,' casting a sweeping glance of adulation at the feminine portions of his audience.

'Hear, hear,' broke in Count Pettigrew once more, and he was well backed up by a chorus of heel-hammerers.

'Nor any gentleman like a fine old English gentleman.'

'Quite so, quite so,' interjected Dr Smart.

'Whether he be commercial, professional, or "to the Manor born," bringing up with a confident gaze at the graduated dignitaries on the reserved seats,—and this

masterful sally was greeted with an indulgent cheer all over the room.

'Furthermore,' continued our speaker, 'we all know that French brandies, Champagnes and Burgundies, are exceedingly good, yet to my mind, there's nothing like a nip of real old LL Kinahan, or a noggin of the "Dew of Ben Nevis." A lively tap from Eccleson Tunny, Esquire. 'And French silks and satins, and kid-gloves, may be all very well in their way; in fact, the ladies know they are; still it mustn't be forgotten, we make our own woollens, broadcloths and calicoes, and they're the best in the world.'

A loud 'hear, hear,' from Timothy Clipfarthing, supported

by a sententious nod from his partner, Silas Yardley.

'Finally, although, perhaps, it may be a trifle invidious to refer to it upon this occasion,' leaning well over the table; 'yes, a trifle invidious, considering the friendly purpose I have kept in view, during this discourse; yet say it I must, or I shouldn't deserve the name of an Englishman. The French nation, I admit, is a most brave and gallant one, whose capital city is emblazoned all over with the records of their proud victories on all the battle-fields of Europe excepting ourselves. And for why '-throwing his outspread fingers as high as he could into the air, and beating space with them in rhythm, with his periods—'because they cannot boast of a Cressy, nor an Agincourt, a Blenheim, a Badajoz, a Salamanca or a Vittoria; a battle of the Nile, a Trafalgar or a Waterloo.' Loud and continuous cheering and stamping followed this trumpet-blast of the great Frederick's, and even Messrs juvenile Braddington, Percival, Pukeley and Co. tilted up their lanky parcels in perpendicular exuberance, like jack-tars in a boat with their oars at 'Salute': while high above all the din, you could hear the thunderous hurrahs of Sergeant M'Nab.

Meanwhile, Mr Fledger stood erect, with his hands folded modestly down, gazed at the assembly, and imbibed all the glory; and when the ovation was spent, he cleared his throat, and wound up with much unction in the following terms: 'And now, ladies and gentlemen, I beg to tender you my heart-felt thanks for the very kind and courteous reception you have been so good as to accord me, and I have only to say, in conclusion, that if anyone would like to ask a question, touching upon the subject I have been

enlarging upon, I shall be most happy to reply to the best of my ability; to the end that no information may be lacking, which I am able to give you.' Then he sat down, wiped his face, the best he could, with his used-up handkerchief, and throwing himself back with careless dignity, rested upon his laurels,—hero that he was, while awaiting the coming of any possible inquiries.

He hadn't to wait long.

There was an uneasy silence of half a minute and then, the venerable Archdeacon got upon his legs—a process which, as the legs were not active ones, required some preparation. He didn't ask any questions, nor did he seem at all anxious for any further enlightenment upon the lecturer's 'great subject.' Still it was plain he had

something to say-and this is how he said it.

'I-ah-rise to remark for myself, and I trust for everyone present' (first facing the master and then veering round to the audience), 'that our friend's discourse has been very entertaining, very diverting indeed; yet I am constrained to take exception to some portions of the subject-matter and-er-to the unguarded manner in which he has thought proper to treat them; and here allow me to say, in perfect seriousness, that however daintily we attempt to handle pitch, we are certain to be defiled, more or less-therefore, wouldn't it be better to leave the pitch alone? I think, too, I certainly do think, that some of these little exhibits' (extending a deprecating hand towards the figures,—bisque, bronze and besom d'amour, set out upon the table), 'although very artistic, no doubt, are somewhat out of place at a gathering of this kind,—made up so largely, as it is, of our juvenile element, and—ah—of ladies who are not accustomed to look upon such things with unmixed satisfaction.' He coughed dryly and went on again. 'I say, too, and I say it advisedly, that our friend cannot be deemed a proficient in the French language, judging by the frequent allusions, h-hah—shall I say illusions—he has made in it' (looking round at his immediate listeners with a twinkle in his eyes), 'and moreover' (assuming now a tone of reprehensive gravity), 'I venture to express the hope that, for the sake of his charges, he is conscientious enough to engage a French master, otherwise, I—ah—pity the poor scholars,' and he bestowed a compassionate glance

upon the grinning and circumambient schoolboys. 'Our friend, I'm sure, will excuse these remarks, as I do assure him I have only spoken in what I consider to be the best interests of everybody concerned.' Then he paused a moment, faced round to the master once more, thanked him very rosily for his amusing entertainment and sat down.

The blood prickled in our principal's face, with the shock of that archdeacon's damnatory words, and he was about to rebound in a valorous pretest, when another plausible assailant arose; it was Braddington, père, who, with an ugly smirk on his unpleasant face, abruptly put a question to the master.

'Can you tell us, sir, anything about the cobblers of Paris? We've been listening to a rare lot of information concerning the different kinds of people you met with over there; common sort as well as top-nobs. Now, you'll think me a curious man, but I take a great interest in the cobblers, just the plain cobblers, understand; whether in Paris or anywhere else. I really do, sir, and if you'll be kind enough, I should like you to tell me how they seem to make out in Paris, and whether any of 'em ever get to be great men, over there; that is to say, lecturers, schoolmasters, professors, and that sort of thing? Now do tell us all something about it, sir, if so be as you'd stoop to take notice of such humble folks. You won't mind me asking the question, because I'm a funny kind of a man'; then he nodded cunningly at Mr Fledger, and dropped into his seat with a broad and wicked grin. Meanwhile, the master's face exhibited all the beauties of a pink-and-white embarrassment,—creamy round the chaps, and carnation under the eyes; and when he got up to speak, his lips twitched so helplessly that it was some time before he could frame any coherent reply.

'Of course—er,' he stammered; 'that is to say, with every desire in the world to oblige our friend Mr Braddington, I—er—really don't know as I can throw much light upon your inquiries, which do seem to me rather peculiar. I presume the cobblers of Paris are very decent people; but I had no particular reason for looking them up. Of course, I grant you, in that city, as elsewhere, the sons of shoemakers, and the shoemakers themselves, sometimes

may be excellent and remarkable men.'

'To be sure, to be sure they may,' broke in Braddington and his coterie with ironical vehemence.

'Yet, bear with me gentlemen, I fail to see how any special dissertation of mine upon these people could have any value for the majority of my hearers present,' looking anxiously round at his amused and inquisitive audience.

Ahem, and this being the case, and-er-the tenor of our friend's remarks appearing to me somewhat uncalled for, and er-observing that the meeting is anxious to get home, I-er -will draw it to a close, thanking you cordially, ladies and gentlemen, for your kind presence and attention, and wishing you all a courteous good afternoon,'—and our preceptor, behind that tall, extensive table, subsided into his lowbacked chair, palpitating and panic-stricken, yet trusting that he had now put a capper on his querists, and hoping to gaze graciously upon a peaceful and immediate departure of his auditory. He was doomed to disappointment, for the inexorable Braddington got up again, not with the intention of leaving, but with the evident purpose of making more mischief.

All this is mighty fine, sir, mighty fine, I daresay,' he exclaimed, staring round at the company for encourage-'No, no, he won't say more'n he's obliged about the cobblers, not he; he daresn't. I'll bet a crown, though, he did look 'em up when he was over in Paris, if he ever went there at all.' The people pricked up their ears at this. 'It was natural, I mean to say; seeing for why? Because the fellow was nothing but a dirty cobbler himself once, and there's a gentleman here that'll prove it'; and he shook a sturdy forefinger at the recumbent Fledger who, with an involuntary groan, buried his head in the chair-back. thought he'd got hold of a bit of shoeleather when he was hammering into my poor boy the other day, the brute; 'stead of that, it was my own flesh and blood, and I can tell him he's caught a tartar,' and he shook his fist at the sable locks, which were all that was now visible of our poor principal, behind the shelter of his table.

The irate Braddington now came to a halt, and finding, despite his eagerness to go on, that he was not primed for an extended invective, plumped himself down and chuckled at the hubbub around him,—for the decorum of the audience was swept away, each unit thereof becoming a discordant

personality.

'Lawks-a-daisy-me!' ejaculated Miss Felicity Beardmore, from the back of the throng; 'only to think of it now! and such a nice-spoken gentleman as he is, too.'

'A cobbler, do you say?' inquired Lawton Bumper, Esq.,

half rising, and bending over his chair.

'Yes, sir,' replied Braddington, 'and what's more, we're

going to prove it.'

'The devil he was,' shouted Eccleson Tunny as he gazed up at the silent rostrum, and at the principal's cowering headpiece, just visible beyond it.

'How perfectly absurd,' remarked Mrs Buttersquire to her reverend spouse, while treating the same poor noddle

to a stony stare through her upcast eyeglasses.

'What amazing effrontery to be sure,—and to get up and address an audience like this, too,' placidly observed Erasmus Swallow to his neighbour the sergeant.

'Aweel, now,' responded the gallant M'Nab, in a generous flush of vernacular, and facing him full, 'dinna ye fash him for that, mon,—why I was juist a tailor meself, preevious to

joyning the yarmy.'

But now there arose from his seat a kid-gloved gentleman of gracious demeanour, who begged the attention of the meeting. It was Mr Percival. 'Pardon me, ladies and gentlemen,' he said; 'but I won't detain you very long. Our friend on the platform,—I think he's there still, though I can't see him,—has just remarked that a dissertation from him upon the cobblers of Paris would have no value for this meeting, and I don't say it would, but there is one particular cobbler, not of Paris, but formerly of our own good old city of York, whose fairy tale, in a few words, should not, I fancy, prove uninteresting to you, although a trifle "uncalled for," no doubt, from Mr Fledger's standpoint, or vanishing point, whichever it is,' casting a quizzical glance at what he could see of that pitiable heap of wretchedness in the name of the master. 'It is embodied,' he went on, 'in a letter I received last evening from Dr Henry Hartram Bolderlash, of Burton College, Mancaster, who seems anxious to enlighten us upon the subject I have indicated. Let me read you the letter,' and he drew it forth from his breast-pocket, and read to them as follows, clearly and forcibly, as the doctor's style demanded:—

'Arlington House, 'Higher Hampton, Mancaster.

'DEAR SIR,—According to my promise to you last week, that I would advise you of all I might learn of the antecedents of that Fledger of yours, I am now sending you quite a budget of information which, though chiefly fortuit-

ous, seems tolerably reliable and capable of proof.

'After that disgraceful affair at Fledger's Academy the other day, I left with the fixed intention of looking up the fellow's credentials when I got to town, as I had already known him as an impudent pretender. So I made inquiries in London, and found, as I expected I should, that your man is not a member of the College of Preceptors, nor do they know anything of him at the Society of Arts; that he holds no degree from any British university, while his professorship of caligraphy is a myth too ludicrous to be taken seriously.

'On my return journey, I was singularly fortunate in this Fledger business, as I travelled all the way with a man who

was as good as a book upon it.

'When we were passing Waltonbury, I noticed this individual glaring savagely at the receding town, and the object of his antipathy appeared to be that huge signboard of Fledger's, which can be seen for several miles along the railway. Turning his head, he caught me smiling at him. "Pretty little town, sir?" he blurted out with a grin. "Yes," I replied, "it's a cosy old place." "But what do you say to that there big lettering, sir?" jerking his thumb over his shoulder. I answered him that it was the boldest piece of humbug I had ever encountered.

"I uphold you there, sir," he rejoined, "but it's all of a batch with the man that put it up; I know him of old,

and I've had a sickener of him too."

'At this I felt interested, and we got into conversation. He told me his name was William Wardle, and that he was "a commercial traveller doing a little business round the country," and making his home at Mancaster where he has a wife and family.

'In reply to my inquiries as to what he knew of Fledger, he entered at once into his history, assuring me that he had

known him from quite a lad.

'He told me that his proper name was Filcher, and

that his father is a cobbler in York, where he has lived for many years in a blind alley off the Micklegate. That he has a brother in a small way of business at Middlesborough. His mother was a poor, hard-working woman of quite a religious turn, but so brutally treated by her husband that at last she ran away from him to live with her uncle, taking Freddy along with her. Soon afterwards she died, and Freddy was sent back to his father to work on the boots and shoes; but not proving very diligent, old Filcher used to give him a "good lambasting whiles and again" for his laziness. After one of those lickings our young hopeful ran away from home, cobbled for a year or two with various masters, and then dropped out of sight, budding forth eventually as a bookseller's assistant at Whitby. Here, finding himself alone and having little to do, and the bookseller fuddling most of the time in his back parlour, young Filcher took occasion to pick up a sort of education out of the books in the shop.

'Matters continued in this way for several years, until his employer being "taken off" in a drinking bout, he further improved his opportunities by decamping with a pick of the books to parts unknown; and for a long time he was out of the ken of William Wardle, who had hitherto been a desultory companion. By-and-by, William heard from him as a teacher in a boarding-school at Westonsuper-mare, from which establishment he was ultimately ejected. After this he seems to have disappeared again, cropping up once more as a bookseller at Mancaster, where, as I told you, he secured the patronage of Burton College, and tried many schemes to ingratiate himself with our All these failing, along with his business, he cleared out from the neighbourhood, and induced his friend Wardle who, so far as I could gather, was not at this time sunning himself on the heights of Prosperity, to embark with him in a variety of catch-penny enterprises, and travel round the country. At one time—it was a board-and-canvas shooting gallery; at another—it was an itinerary doctor's-shop, in front of which they used to cry up their cure-alls and ointments, worm powder and pills. Their last venture was a "cheap-jack" concern in the crockery-ware line, including a pair of high-stepping, broken-winded horses and a flashy caravan with a trestle

platform packed on top, which they could rig up and rush out upon, over the heads of their listeners; in all which proceedings, as I understand it, Mr Wardle did the dirty work—the harnessing, the cooking and the touting—while Filcher, in a tall silk hat and a long great-coat with a fur collar, played the gentleman, the orator, the man of lofty mettle, who, at the close of each harrangue, despatched his underling over the gang-planks to seek amongst the crowd, customers for his crockery.

'Wardle gave me other details of their partnership, while we journeyed homewards; but the upshot of it all appeared to be that Filcher gathered in the profits, and escaped from his co-adjutor, keeping constantly on the move, lest Wardle should fasten upon him. Afterwards, when he supposed that he had "given him the slip," he settled down as a bookkeeper to a wealthy Farmington butcher—a widower with two daughters, the eldest of whom he surreptitiously married, and upon that exploit being discovered, which it very soon was, he was kicked out of the place by the father.

'From this time onward, for a number of years, your paragon seems to have held a multiplicity of unstable positions, with occasional success, but prevailing discomfiture; sometimes teaching school; at others keeping shop—any kind of shop where capital or stock-in-trade were not indispensable. He was a writing-master here, a drawing-master there, and a temperance lecturer somewhere else. Afterwards he was the keeper of a subscription library at Godsall, which he left in a moribund condition, to assume the rôle of a "city missionary" in London.

'Doubtless this versatile gentleman practised a variety of other dodges, during that long period, but Wardle could not always be running after him. Finally, the butcher fatherin-law dying, and his daughters succeeding to his possessions, Filcher found himself able to turn over quite a new leaf by setting up that academy of his at Waltonbury, with the history of which you are sufficiently acquainted.

'Now what will his next move be? I think, although our bird-of-passage is a rara avis, we should clip his pinions and pull out his tail-feathers.

'Wardle tells me that he still occasionally makes a descent upon him at Waltonbury House. "Pay me what you've owed

me so many years, you old rascal!" exclaimed he to Filcher, when he had cornered him, in the hall one day. But he had scarcely got the words out of his mouth when Mrs Filcher came down upon him like an avalanche, and hurled him off the door-step with such loud-mouthed vehemence that William deemed it wise to depart, and confessed to me that he had little heart to go there again.

'Now, Mr Percival, I have nothing more to tell you except to mention that I got a letter from Mrs Aldermaston last night, saying that Fledger intends holding forth to-morrow, and if he does, I suggest that you should spring this upon him, when he has finished his spouting. It should give him

a nasty set back.

'I enclose Mr Wardle's business card and remain, my dear sir,—Yours faithfully, H. HARTRAM BOLDERLASH.'

'Ladies and gentlemen,' concluded Mr Percival, very gravely, as he folded up the letter, 'what I have just read to you explains itself, so that I needn't enlarge upon it, more than to say that if we have permitted this trickster to make fools of us, we needn't suffer him to do so again. lived here, ladies and gentlemen, solely upon our sufferance and support, and we have the remedy in our own hands. say we must withdraw that support and refuse that sufferance, and tell him plainly to get out of this town at once, and no nonsense about it,—and in saying this, I shall be very much surprised if I haven't voiced the sentiments of every person present.' Then, with a searching look of inquiry around him, and an ominous scowl at the bowed head behind the platform table, he put Bolderlash's letter into his pocket and sat down.

There followed, of course, a loud and general uprising, which was accentuated by the poignant ejaculations of the 'quality' visitors, who, as they wended their urgent way towards the door, felt they had been badly trapped.

'This is a glaring outrage!' exclaimed Count Pettigrew, the tip of his nose glowing a vivid scarlet as he struggled to

get through the crowd.

'The fellow deserves a good hiding,' shouted Eccleson Tunny, as he and his hastened to follow the count.

'Couldn't this man be indicted for a nuisance?' queried the Rev. Antonio Buttersquire, over his lady's shoulder, to Lawton Bumper, who was pressing up behind him.

'Well, hardly,' replied the latter gentleman, as they jostled along, 'although I think this assumption of degrees and fellowships may land him in trouble.'

'There's one thing we can do,' said Ralph Prescott to his particular friends as they pushed their way out. 'We can pickle this Fledger in next Saturday's Gazette.'

'Too bad, altogether too bad,' urged the venerable archdeacon upon the members of his family, as he stroked his white poll, and quietly joined the exodus, with the Misses Grimjaw and the 'select young ladies' close in the rear their noses tilted and their nostrils twitching in mute disgust and bridled indignation.

In the meanwhile, the mass of the audience, relieved from the punctilio of their departing superiors, broke forth in a tumult of uproarious jocularity. Masters Braddington, Percival, Pukeley and Aldermaston stripped the papers off their shanky parcels, each disclosing, amid roars of laughter, a battered old shoe, nailed to the end of a broomstick. With these weapons they jumped to their feet and belaboured the table in front of the master, bobbed them in his face and shook them over his head, dinning into his ears this dreadful doggerel, several times repeated:—

'Cobbler, cobbler, mend our shoes, Hold up your head now, and don't refuse. Stitch 'em with "wax ends," uppers and soles, Nail the heels and cobble the holes. Now for the price, sir, please to say what, And how long it'll take you to cobble the lot.'

'Ha-ha, haa! hooray! Here's a jolly spree. Go it again, boys,' shouted the jubilant company, 'the more the merrier, there's nothing like leather,' and a host of similar encomiums, while chairs were knocked over and forms upset by the swaying and turbulent throng.

But in the midst of this hullabaloo there was a sudden explosion upon the platform, for the master sprang snorting to his feet, livid and desperate. For an instant he faced his tormentors, clenching his fists; but the howls of ridicule, with which he was assailed, proved entirely too much for him, and staggering back, he made a rush for the playground-

door. The distance wasn't considerable, but he was forced to make a circumbendibus while running the gauntlet of his persecutors, who hustled him on every side, while he doubled and dodged, jumping, in steeplechase fashion, over prostrate forms and inopportune desks, to effect his escape, which he presently did, amidst a hurricane of cheers, peals of shrieking laughter and a volley of old shoes, broomsticks and inkstands, which were flung after him with a right goodwill, as he scampered across the playground to his laboratory. Then there went up a roar of merriment, in which every soul in the schoolroom took part, magnates and ministers, townspeople and country-folk, boys, teachers and all. It was a superb send-off of signal completeness, the import of which could be misunderstood by nobody; and it was heard alike by the passers-by in the High Street and by the counter-jumpers at Clipfarthing & Yardley's, at the corner of the lane. Especially, was it listened to by the denizens of Waltonbury House, from the fledglet in the nursemaid's lap to the cook in the kitchen and the maids in the pantry; from the brats running about in the back passage to the gardener paring his nails in the woodshed. Yea, it claimed the attention of Madame Celestia and her sister, who were busy with their crochet work in the best parlour,' and of poor, solitary Conny, upstairs in her bedroom, where she was sewing up a slit in her everyday frock. It startled Bobby Buttons, too, into a guilty panic, as he pilfered the pickles in the storeroom, uproused somnolent Cæsar to prick-eared alacrity and stampeded those 'harmless necessaries,' black, tabby, and tortoiseshell, that were dozing on the garden wall.

Yes, indeed, that ear-smiting jubilation reached every creature round about, and they each feared or wondered, in proportion to its pertinence as touching themselves. . . .

It will be needless to dilate upon the home-going of Mr Fledger's audience. You can fancy, in all their fulness, these particulars: the babel in the lane behind the schoolroom; the triumph of the youngsters, their witticisms and bandied jests; the discussions of their elders at the street-corners, with the *quidnuncs* of Waltonbury hovering near; the quips and taunts of the gamesome burghers as they wended their ways hilariously homeward; the glorious

gossip in the evening at a hundred tea-tables, where the conversation was patent to all, about matters farcically Fledgeresque; the wrathful letters penned after supper to be sent to the master next day, instead of his accustomed pupils; and at the end of it all, paters and maters talking in bed, over the various features of the delectable situation.

Ah! me, you will picture all this, ad libitum, I know, in your imagination, and you'll not go very far wrong; though if you did, it wouldn't signify, for our Frederick's greatness is overpast. His sun is now sinking in a darkling sea and the waves are closing over it. Let us, in sadness, take up his tale once more.

Mr Fledger, broken free of his persecutors, had hurried back into his stronghold. Quaking with rage and mortification, he dropped into his arm-chair, gripping his knees. In his unbounded distress he had forgotten to lock the door, and Conny, who had heard her father bolting along the back passage, well knew where to find him, and was downstairs in the laboratory in a trice, and hovering round him, too frightened to speak; and she never thought of the door. So, the fair Celestia, bouncing across the hall, kicked it wide open, and burst in upon father and daughter with the fury of a whirlwind.

'Whell!' she screamed, planting herself in front of them, with her giant arms akimbo, 'you hugly old ape, what have you been up to now? Them people out there are kicking up row enough to split my head open. What game have you been up to, I say once more, you white-livered old baboon? Let me tell you, you sha'n't carry on your fool's pranks in my house.' Then, looking round her, she suddenly broke out again. 'And this is a pretty pig-sty of a place you've got here, don't you think? Just you clear out, now, whilst I have this dirty hole washed out and sweetened, and some of your old bottles and muck dumped into the dustbin. I promise you, when you come back, you won't know it for the same place. Now then, out you go,' and she fastened her hands in the coat-collar of her unfortunate spouse and began hauling him out of his chair.

The master seemed dazed for a moment, what with this and what with that, and instead of protesting, simply gasped for breath, and Conny, seeing her father treated in this brutal manner, and making no effort at resistance, flew into a paroxysm of grief and rage.

'You wicked, wicked woman!' she cried. 'How dare you treat father in that shameful way!' and she sprang at her mother's hands like a panther, and tried to tear them from their hold.

'Why, you saucy young minx,' yelled her mother, 'what do you mean by chirruping up to me, eh? Take that for your impudence, you ugly little vermin,' and she gave poor Conny such a terrible blow on the mouth with the flat of her hand that it felled her to the floor, speechless, and nearly insensible.

At this, our Fledger, suddenly transformed, leaped to his feet, a ferocious tiger. 'You miscreant! you savage! you hell-slut!' he raved. Then, catching up one of the dogirons on the hearth, he flung it at the woman's head. The heavy missile struck her squarely in the cheek, laying it open down to the jaw, and falling upon her extended foot, bruised it severely.

With a howl of rage and pain, she was about to throw herself upon him, when he sprang back, seized the other dog-iron with both hands and brandished it over his head for another blow. The fury paused and stared at him.

Years of smothered hatred, gathered to a focus, fed to his eyes a baleful light, and she saw that she was confronted by a mortal danger, and should she attack him now, her life must pay the forfeit.

'Come another step,' hissed the man, in a deadly whisper,

'and I'll brain you like an ox!'

'Bloodthirsty villain! Wretch! Murderer!' screamed the awful-looking virago, 'this is the end, mind,' and staggering back—she limped painfully away, groaning at intervals, and dripping with blood.

Mr Fledger threw down the dog-iron, rushed to the door,

slammed and bolted it, then, all at once collapsing with a hoarse cry, turned and fell in a palsied heap beside his poor little girl, who was slowly awakening to a sense of the horrible encounter. . . .

You may fancy the misery, the agony, mutual and confessed, of father and daughter, alone together in that fateful chamber. Sobbing, shivering, trembling, helplessly they clutched each other as they stared at that andiron in the middle of the floor, and the blood that was upon it and beneath it.

Their eyes followed up the big, red drops that trailed away to the threshold, and they listened in throbbing silence to the confusion out beyond,—in the kitchen, in the bedrooms, in the open hall-way; to the hum of voices, the muttered exclamations and the runnings to and fro.

'Oh! father, dear, my poor father, what have you done?' moaned the wretched child, as she clung round his neck.

But he only pressed her nervously to his weak embrace, and was silent.

Hours passed away, and darkness came on apace.

Outside, the clouds rolled up and the rain pattered on the window, but they gave no heed. Far into the small hours they crouched miserably together. No one came near them, and all the house was still. Then Conny, with a last fearsome kiss, stole away, with tremulous step, to lie down sleepless on her hard little cot; and Mr Fledger rolled himself up in a dirty blanket, the remnant of former bivouacs, and cowering in his arm-chair, blinked wakefully out at the blankness of night, and prayed for the grey of the morning. . . .

And now—let me finish this chapter with a solemn hush, round about the presence of the principal, because within that riven frame, there dwelt a graveyard stillness. For though it was true—our grosser Frederick still survived, his ethereal part had insensibly passed away; his classic, academic soul, so incontinently curbed and vanquished, had slipped its mortal leashes, and, unbeknown to ruthless foes, had winged its flight to far-away fields of masterly erudition and command.

And the tear-laden skies are weeping now a heavy deluge upon his laboratory window, and the disconsolate winds are fretting and moaning in the soddened branches of the trees in the garden, and howling a hollow requiem down the empty chimney, whilst a solitary, stark and devilish raven sits moping on a broken gargoyle, under the eaves of the house of Waltonbury, and canine Cæsar, gaunt and grim, grizzles in his barrel at the wash-house door. . . .

Gentle reader, marvel not; one and all of them, what less could they do—to mark the dismal moments of that gruesome circumcession?

Alack and alas! for the MASTER is dead.

Go to! Let us dish up the baked meats to his funeral.

Vale Horatio! Sic transit gloria mundi!

Here, then, do we render, in a timely pause, honour and grace to the dear departed, who is not perished but simply passed away, leaving us a reliquary of sprightly memories, to woo out hearts betimes, to loving reminiscence. Then how fondly we'll cherish that solatium to our loss, reverently, faithfully, digitating thus:—

His Sunday progresses to the Abbey Church, fittingly vested in collegiate trim, townsfolk and yokels all agape—

he, the glorious marshal of a mettlesome company.

His wondrous exercitations at the academy, and all his outspread industries there with brush and pen; his kangaroo leaps and tangent flights athwart the fields of science.

His scholical harangues and battles-royal in masterhood

of his gamesome fledglings.

His weekly trumpetings to the 'parents and friends,' and his suppletory juggleries and learned harlequinades. And, ah! behind the scenes—those dreadful buffetings on Benedictory shoals.

His sequent sage forbearances and self-incarcerations.

His smothered resentments, flaring up in a furnace of righteous indignation; and then—his last great battle—single-handed, so desperately fought, so lamentably lost.

His splendid fury, hence.

His lethal pangs and mortal throes.

His DEATH of dumb despair.

CHAPTER XVI

DISINTEGRATION

DAY dawns again in the sanctum-sanctorum, and Mr Fledger throws off his night-robe, gets on to his feet, straightens out his limbs and looks heavily around him.

That deadly fire-dog, reposing in the dark trail of his

wife's blood, gives him his morning salutation, and a cogent reminder, should he ignore it, that things are not well in the house of Waltonbury. He takes a circuitous turn or two about the room, pitches his blanket over the ugly memento, and throws himself down again. The sober light of a sunless morning, now stealing into the room, gives stress to all his surroundings, directing our stricken hero to a mental gaze upon things—as they are, and disposing him to accept the logic of inexorable fact. He is aching all through of his utter vanquishment, but the enormity he was guilty of at the last, weighs him heavily down, while fear and suspense magnify its probable consequences.

That fierce, ensanguined creature called his wife—oh! how he dreads even so much as to look upon her face again. Foreprized of his tortured fancies, he is listening already for the rap of the peremptory constable, who, impatiently halted outside the door, has come to take him away to the police station; or — what means this deathlike stillness? 'My God!' he exclaims to himself, in an access of alarm, 'can I have killed her, I wonder?' He tries to set his teeth together, for they rattle in his head He fears to break the silence by the movelike castanets. ment of a finger, lest he should open up a riot of damnation. For a long time he sits in this condition, until at last he can bear the strain no longer, and starts up on a hazardous quest for tidings of some sort, for, come what will, he must know the worst. As he snatches at the doorknob, it turns in his hand, and his faithful Conny enters, and closes the door quickly behind her.

Her father plies her with questions, quaking meanwhile from head to foot.

'Your mother, Conny, tell me quick, how is she? What are they all doing? Has—er—anyone been sent for yet? A doctor, I mean, or anybody—eh?'

'Well, father, she's been dreadfully bad all night, for I couldn't sleep a wink, and I heard her groaning. I don't think any of 'em went to bed. I peeped in her room as I was coming downstairs. She's asleep, with her face bound up, and aunty is lying in her clothes beside her, and I think she's asleep too. The cook's sitting in a chair facing 'em, with her hands crossed in her lap, rocking herself;

and there's lots of litter on the floor-basins and towels and things; and they haven't put the lamp out. I was afraid to go in, so I went down into the kitchen, and the servants were all sitting round the table; and I asked 'em how mother was, and they told me her face was cut shocking bad, and she'd bled like a pig all about the house-before they could get her to bed. After that she had a fit or something. But when the doctor came he sewed up the wound, and gave her some medicine that sent her to sleep; and he says it won't be dangerous unless erysipelas sets in, but she'll be disfigured for life. And he asked aunty how it happened, and whether he should speak to the police about it. And that's all I could find out, father, though they haven't lit the kitchen fire yet, so I don't know when you'll get any breakfast. And oh! father, let's both run away, in case they should come and take you off to prison, for I couldn't bear that; I'm sure it would kill me. Besides I couldn't live here all alone, with mother and the rest of 'em, to save my life. No, I couldn't; I'd Oh! it's so dreadful,' rather go and beg in the streets. and the poor girl burst into tears, flinging her arms round her father's neck.

'It's all over with me now, little girl,' replied Mr Fledger, after a feeble attempt at fatherly consolation. 'I'm ruined between the lot of 'em, that's certain; though I think I could have held my head above water if it hadn't been for that cursed row in your mother's parlour.'

'Dux femina facti—a woman has done it!' he suddenly exclaims, after a pause, with a spurt of his former pedantry, and smiting his temple, he drops into his arm-chair, and takes refuge in a hang-dog silence, while Conny crouches, weeping, at his knees.

Several hours pass away, and they are still huddled together, when they are conscious of approaching footsteps, accompanied by a confused murmur of voices, and the next moment they are both galvanised in their grief by a sharp rapping at the door.

'Come in,' says Fledger, with quivering bravado, after a critical pause, and he gulps down a lump in his throat, and tries to brace up for a very painful interview. The door opens and there enters,—not the inspector of police with a posse comitatus at his heels, as he had expected, but the

innocuous and melancholy Ladlaw, accompanied by Messrs Quelch, Cramsey and Pinch, who are correspondingly grievous and glum. Mr Fledger heaves a sigh of relief, and brings down his brows.

'Good morning, sir,' adventures Septimus, in his deepest bass, emptying a bag full of letters on the principal's table. 'I have brought you these letters, sir; they were left at the schoolroom about nine o'clock; and as your day scholars have not appeared, I infer these are sent to explain their absence. Furthermore, I have to tell you that your boarders cannot be induced to take up their tasks this morning, nor to submit to the usual regulations. In short, we perceive, sir,—my colleagues and myself, that your school is hopelessly disorganised, and yourself totally discredited, by yesterday's disclosures; and—er—therefore not deeming it possible that we can be of any further service to you under the circumstances, we request you to pay us what is due us, and we will take our departure.'

'Humph!' replies the principal, 'a very neat little speech, upon my word, though it's like your damned impudence to come under my nose and deliver it. Where's Sheepshead?'

'Mr Sheepshead, sir, for reasons best known to himself,

does not join with us in this procedure.'

'Doesn't he, indeed? That's very kind of young Sheepshead. Now, look you here, you all want to bolt, and that suits me to a T just now. If it didn't, by G—d! I wouldn't let you. Ladlaw, your month isn't up yet by a week. I'll give you a fortnight's pay. Quelch, I paid you yours the other day, so you'll get nothing out of me.' Mr Quelch explodes, but Fledger goes on. 'Cramsey and Pinch, you mealy-mouthed humbugs, I'll give you a week's wages each, and it's more than you've earnt the whole month you've been here.'

Then he strides over to his cupboard, takes out of a sly corner a little leather bag of sovereigns and silver, and doles out the payments to them according to this appraisement.

'I always felt you were no gentleman, and this proves it,' remarks the disconsolate yet temperless Ladlaw, as he

pockets his cash.

'Come, sir, this won't do for me—this won't do for

me! 'exclaims little choleric, red-headed Quelch. 'You shall pay me a month's salary; you shall, sir, or I'll sue you for it!'

'Now, be off, every one of you!' shouts the principal, 'and give me none of your cheek,' and he ties up his

money and puts it back in the cupboard.

'Oh! come on,' says Cramsey to Pinch, as they finger their slender emoluments, 'it's no use talking to a fellow like him; he's only a low blackguard,' and they all shuffle out of the room, Ladlaw muttering infant thunders, and Rufus Quelch throwing off, with many a hand-swing, a coruscation of expletives against everything and everybody at Waltonbury, with the niggardly Frederick for his climax. Then they shamble back to their respective quarters, each one to pack up his poor traps, preparatory to a final exit from the house of Waltonbury. . . .

'Rats leaving a sinking ship,' remarks our preceptor, bitterly, as, the interview ended, he returns to the con-

solation of his arm-chair.

An hour or so later you shall see those unfortunate teachers walk dismally down the street and get into the omnibus, as it stands in front of the 'Bull and Beer Bottle,' and Boniface Burlyrigg comes to the door, when he sees them get in, grins knowingly in their faces, and tips a wink to the coachman, as they rumble off down High Street to the railway station, with several shabby, brass-nailed trunks wobbling about on the roof of the 'bus, and Mr Ladlaw's leather hat -box, with his father's walking -stick thrust through the handle, perched on the seat beside the driver.

And this is the last you will learn of those 'ushers' of Waltonbury, with whom we may the more tolerably part, in that we never had the pleasure of their intimate acquaintance, taking a half exception in favour of our gaunt friend, Septimus, whose uncommon attributes tempt us to pay him the tribute of a more extended gaze. So I will tell you that this sorry gentleman, when he gets to town, answers an advertisement in the *Clerical Times* for a 'head teacher' at a grammar school at Eversham, and secures the situation; but alas! is soon turned off by the Rev. Dr Fuzzbuzz, as not being 'sufficiently grounded in anything,'—whereupon he returns chap-fallen to the Metropolis. Henceforth you

shall find him, in various capacities, doing his hopeless best to stave off the cruciations of his poverty, finally drifting into a lodging-house kept by a Mrs Kamus, in the very best part (and bad is the best) of Brewer's Street, Somer's Town, in which gloomy neighbourhood he ekes out a miserable existence as a 'visiting accountant' for small shopkeepers, and a 'teacher of the French language.' Also, he conducts a night-school, for the benefit of those 'ladies and gentlemen' of that locality, whose educations have been neglected (very much neglected), and who imbibe from him, at a nominal, yet ill-paid fee, a smattering of the elementary courses—spelling, letter-writing, a little bookkeeping, and a very little grammar; and a dingy zinc plate on the dirty street door sets forth his name, and testifies to the conditions I have shown you.

And when he has nothing to do (periods that are plenty), our poor 'proctor' goes out and plants himself on the street-corner, where he may see the great roof of the St Pancras Railway Station, in process of construction, protected very generally from the impertinences of the street-urchin, so ubiquitous in those parts, by his plaintive and superior sadness—his father's walking-stick for his sole companion,—its dog's head ivory thrust into his mouth, while he listens placidly to the roar and clatter of the iron-work going on above him, and gazes for long, incontinent hours at those Yorkshire vulcans, pounding on the fiery rivets, a

hundred feet up in the murky air.

So good-bye, Ladlaw—Septimus Latimer, thou seventh son of a depleted sire, with sisters more numerous than thy brothers. Thy natal forces shall barely sustain thee through the weak vicissitudes of thy prevailing indigence, until, ah! well, until the supervention, after many warnings, of a final sickness, that may be decent, if doctorless, to be sequeled by an unwept funeral and a nameless grave.

Thou poor abortive atom of humanity. Thou shadow of a shade. In a world so checkered, as it is, of unavailing sorrows, aimless and manifold, where the miseries of a multitude may in no sense alleviate the sufferings of the few, it were idle to tell thee thou hast a legion of counterparts. . . .

The day wore on, and Conny, according to her custom upon these difficult occasions, had procured some refresh-

ments for her father in the laboratory, while he, on his part, had despatched her about the house from time, to time on errands of prudential exploration; and he finally gathered, from her reports, that his gentle lady, for some reason, didn't seem eager to make a public affair of their late misunderstanding. She is never so valorous out-of-doors as she is within, and perhaps she feels that the flavour of her own performances, if revealed, would not accord with the public taste. . . .

Mr Fledger sat in his arm-chair and cogitated long and painfully on his critical condition and prospects. He was hopelessly beaten, that he well knew, and he cherished no further illusions. It was plain to him that the folks of Waltonbury would have no more of his pranks at any price, so that whatever else he should do, he must certainly get away from the neighbourhood as 'quickly and quietly' as possible. Ugly business might crop up at any moment too, in connection with his M.C.P. and his F.S.A., to say nothing of his professorship of caligraphy at Burton College. It was clear that his enemies were very active, and he had no reason to expect they would show him any forebearance. True, it gave him a pang to relinquish at once and forever the rôle of scholar and gentleman, which he had been playing so perseveringly, but having once decided that to do so was inevitable, no other abandonment troubled him much. He had no scruples as to the manner of his escape, and very few as to whom or how many he might find it convenient to leave behind him, with the single exception of his 'little girl,' whom he had no intention of parting with if he could help it.

However, when he came to look closely at the alternatives to his present mode of living, he realised that the vigour and resourcefulness of his former days had vanished, and that any return to his mountebank tricks would probably prove disastrous. He was broken, exhausted, disgusted beyond measure, and to shrink into some convenient corner, or jog along some humble by-way of life, was now his dominant idea. He would never again aim at distinction or attempt control, but would resign himself to leading-strings, no matter how hampering they might prove to be. Anything, anything, which might afford him a modicum of peace,—a freedom from strife and persecution. Then he

worried and schemed, and thought it all out again, and came at length to a definite conclusion. Yes, he has it now. He'll pack off his boarders, free of ceremonial; get rid of Sheepshead; leave his better-half, her sister and the children to do as they please with the place; damn it, they'd got all the money anyhow; skip off one morning to London, and lose himself there. Then he'd change his name once more and take a situation. There was Conny, to be sure, but he'd manage to take her along with him. No, no, he didn't want to lose his 'little girl'; she was the only creature, excepting his mother, who had ever cared for him. Besides, he craftily said to himself, 'She may come in handy in a good many ways.'

So now it was all settled in his mind, and he sent his

docile daughter to search for Mr Sheepshead.

'So here you are, Nemo,' he began, as soon as that sleek and politic youth presented himself. 'Well, sir, how is it you didn't go off with the other rascals, eh? Don't stand gaping at me like a stuck pig, but sit down, sir, and look natural. Nothing to sit upon? Very well, stand up, then. Now, what have you got to say for yourself?'

'I—I hope, Mr Fledger, sir, that I—have your approbation in refusing to leave you at a time when you particularly needed assistance. They persuaded me very hard to go with them, sir, and called you all sorts of vile names, but I felt it my duty to stand by you while you were single-handed. Besides, Mr Fledger, I couldn't do less in return for your many kindnesses to me. I can't be

ungrateful, sir.'

'Kindnesses to you!' broke in his master. 'What kindnesses, for God's sake? I'm not in the habit of showing much favour to cattle of your sort. No humbug, Sheepshead; it doesn't go down with me. Not ungrateful, eh? Don't you know, sir, we old fellows define gratitude as a sense of favours to come; and, if that's your kind of gratitude, you've got deuced little to be grateful about, for I shall pack you off to-morrow, like I did the rest.'

'I am exceedingly sorry to hear that, Mr Fledger, sir. I'm willing to serve you on—er—almost any terms, if you would be so kind as to give me the privilege. I—I could take charge of the boarders and assist you in establishing

your school again. I trust, sir, you have always found me subservient to your wishes. I've always tried to be, sir.'

'Well, well, I don't say you haven't; but it doesn't matter now, Sheepshead, for I'm going to break up the school; break it up at once, too, so listen to me. I want you to write out a circular to the boarders' parents, something after this style: That, owing to the serious state of his health, and so forth, the Principal of Waltonbury House Academy feels he can no longer discharge his duties conscientiously towards his young gentlemen, and has therefore decided, very much to his sorrow and regret, to bring those labours to a close. He has, accordingly, sent Master So-and-so back to his friends, with his best compliments, deepest regrets, and all that sort of thing. You can write out a draft of it this evening, and bring it here before you go to bed. I'll touch it up, and to-morrow morning you can make a lot of copies of it, one to go with each boy. When you've done that, pack up their traps and send 'em off. Then I'll give you your pay, and you can clear out yourself, for I want you all out of the place quick, every man-jack. Now go and write that draft, and let it be something genteel. There, that'll do,' he sharply concluded, as the luckless Sheepshead endeavoured to deliver himself of a plaintive protest. 'No more speechifying, if you please; leave me at once,' and while Nemo sneaked mournfully away, Mr Fledger swung himself round in his arm-chair and irritably gnawed his nails.

It was late in the afternoon, and our Fledger, still in a brown study, was pacing up and down in his laboratory, when an unaccustomed titillation stole into his ear. He paused and listened, for the sound seemed incomprehensible. What could it be? Why—was it really? Yes, it really was. Someone upstairs, in the far reaches of the nursery, was playing on the old piano! whose tinkling rhythms filtered down, so that he could just distinguish them.

It was a piccolo piano,—a piccolo tremulo at that; a crochety, quaversome, tin-kettle of a thing, only one remove from the lackadaisical harpsichord of our respected foremothers, whose thin and senile tones now fluttered through the house; not with the familiar 'five-fingered exercises,' nor yet with jog-trot 'Bonnie Dundee,' 'The

March of the Men of Harlech,' or the 'Green Hills of Tyre' all of which juvenile performances had proved so tiresome to him upon former and happier occasions.

No, indeed. The melodies this time were of a more ambitious kind. He opened the door, tip-toed to the foot of the back stairs and listened. A disfigured fragment from 'Il Trovatore' was in progress, and when that died away, there followed in happy disguisement the winsome strain—'Sweet Spirit, hear My Prayer,' which in its turn gave place to that touching song—'The Gipsy's Warning,' which, being brought to its dismal termination, the indomit-

able performer went over the trio again.

Well, there was no mistaking now who the minstrel was, for those three 'lovely pieces' embodied the whole and, I may say, the very sufficient repertoire musicale of his charming sister Angeletta, though that lady had seldom favoured the Fledger household with their recital. Indeed. for a long period—it might have been three years or more -her dainty fingers had not once danced over that yellow old key-board. Then what could it mean? he queried, especially at such a juncture as the present: the house at sixes and sevens, and its mistress stretched upon her couch in painful durance—that mistress by whose mandate that poor little instrument he was listening to had been relegated to the nursery, where its weakling legs had been kicked and its fluted breast torn open by his unhindered, riotous fledglets in the process of their 'jolly larks.' And still the principal gave patient ear to the recurrent music, and pondered and moralised.

'Trust not the man,' quoted he, 'who hath not music in his soul; but can we trust the woman who has?' he asked himself—as he pictured his lady-love in her maiden days, incessantly thumping on that 'pianner.' And these airs which Angeletta was playing,—under what circumstances had be last heard them? The answer came without hesitation, there being no possibility of a doubt. Why, it was the week before Letty was going to be married, and she and her betrothed were sitting together in the best parlour, at mellow eventide, and his gentle spouse sate with them. The master was in his laboratory tinkering a fracture in his 'centrifugal railway.' Yes, it was then these reiterated strains broke forth out of the gladness of Letty's expectant

soul; and they continued, with occasional lapses into noisy merriment, until he was called up to supper, and, incidentally, to enjoy the company of the bridegroom-elect, who was the sexton of St Mark's, a Mr Graveyarde Clay,—a well-to-do, rank-blooded, elderly man who, despite his tristful calling, was a veritable 'broth of a boy'; a gay old Lothario, whose fleshly appetites had kept steady pace with his advancing years. That night, too, they were all so jovially accordant. Ah! who could have imagined the dreadful tragedy that was so soon to follow? For it was only a day or two afterwards, when Mr Graveyarde Clay, in a far too bibulous condition, while helping the undertakers to shoulder a heavy coffin to its resting place, somehow missed his footing at the brink of the grave, though he held on to the coffin, which, falling upon him as he went down, killed him instantly by breaking his neck. In this horrible way was the span of his days shortened by a full decade, according to the standard of 'three score years and ten.'

Yes, ten possible years of connubial blessedness were thus most lamentably lost to our tender nymph, together with those chastening precepts she might have imbibed from the man of her choice, who, in his elderly wisdom, most admired, despite his frail tenement of clay, might have tempered the exuberances of her marital joys, if not of his own, by frequent delicate allusions to their 'latter ends,' which he, as a sexton in full swing, would be often reminded of, through the obsequies and post-obits of his His sudden taking-off was a dreadful blow to Miss Letty, who 'took on' fearfully for a fortnight afterwards, with occasional demonstrations so piercingly oral and poignantly ocular that it was as heartrending to listen to the one as to witness the other. While as to how many woeful hours she consumed at night, bemoaning her virgin wretchedness, on her tear-stained pillow—not a soul but she could have told you. Yet her vigorous nature triumphed over it all, and she gradually came back to her matter-offact self, frowning at passion and eschewing all sentiment.

But now, after years of sensible quietude, here she was, indulging suddenly in that epithalamy once more. What could it mean? And our knowing old rascal, at the foot of the stairs, focussed his eyes on the point of his nose and wagged his head.

'She's touched again, as sure as I am standing here,' he chuckled. 'I wonder who it is now? Some poor fool—that's certain. God help him! But there, I was just such a fool myself, so I'd better hold my tongue.' But as he ruminated. the music ceased, and there was a trampling of heavy feet at the top of the stairs, so he stole back to his room. 'I wonder who the fellow is?' he asked himself again as he closed the door. He soon found out, and this was the manner of his discovery.

The evening had merged into night. Conny had served him his supper, and the stars were blinking at him through the diamond panes of his laboratory window. He had touched up that circular of Sheepshead's, and his 'little girl' had gone to bed. It was high time for him to seek the repose of his swaddling-corner, if he should care to

secure his beauty-sleep.

'I'd better get to bed, I suppose,' he muttered to himself; 'but what was that I wanted to remember first? Oh! I know—that ruler of mine. It rolled on to the floor in that damned confusion yesterday, and it ought to be there now, if nobody's thieved it. Solid silver, that is, and worth something; I'll go and look for it.' So he put a couple of matches in his pocket to light the gas, and went and groped his stealthy way across the playground to the schoolroom, expecting to find everything as black as the grave. Therefore, he was startled, upon coming up to the window, to see a faint, unearthly light glimmering through it. Was it moonshine? He glanced up at the sky. No, nothing but the stars there, and not many of them.

A creepy chill stole up his spine, and spread itself out at the back of his head. 'Better let that ruler go till to-morrow,' he mumbled, 'when I can see what I'm about. I'll slip out again the first thing in the morning'; and he was just on the turn to sneak back to the house, when he thought he heard a familiar voice inside the schoolroom. He hesitated, and listened for a moment; then, most unmistakably, heard it again,—and it banished his ghostly fears. Cowardice gave place to curiosity, and he turned and crept noiselessly up to the high window-sill, and, by clutching it with both hands and standing on his toes, was able to peep in at the bottom.

Here is a picture of what he looked upon, his eyes

dilating with amazement.

A wax 'night-light' is burning in a saucer on top of his desk, its tiny flame making all the darkness of the schoolroom visible; behind it, in his easy-chair—oh! infamous usurpation—reclines the ponderous form of Angeletta Crunch, her face turned cooingly downwards. Her thick, black hair is tumbled over her temples, and her massive arms are locked lovingly round a something who is smothered up beneath her. She makes a movement, when the minikin face of Nemo Sheepshead, not so 'meek and sleek' this time as it might be, becomes dimly apparent, ensconced in the socket of the arm-chair. His eyes are glittering with a painful ecstasy, for Miss Letty is 'sitting upon his lap' from his knees to his chin, and nearly crushes his pitiful anatomy into the chair-cushion. meagre arm, with wrist-band badly ruckled, and skinned of its coat-sleeve up to the elbow, goes exhaustedly about his angel's waist, his fingers clutching at the rigid whalebones that 'shapen' her bodice. Poor fellow, 'tis the utmost he can do towards encircling her; while the smacking of their alternate osculations, mixed up with Letty's fervid postulates and Nemo's amatory murmurs, yield accordant music for the exquisite tableau. And that wan little night-light, so purblindly chaste, is casting over them both a decent mantle of glimmering darkness.

Mr Fledger unhooked his fingers from the windowledge and stood and considered. Should he break in upon

them, or had he better make good his retreat?

Almost mechanically, he decided to do somewhat of both, for how could he deny himself this opportunity for a petty triumph? So he stepped up to the door. A faint streak of light showed it to be ajar; noiselessly he pushed it a few inches open, and intruded his sinister countenance. 'Sheepshead, you smooth-faced young scoundrel you, so I've dropped on to your little game, have I?' he called out. 'You can't be ungrateful, oh, no! Eat him up, Letty, while you're about it. There isn't much of him, and I want him gone.' Then not trusting himself to say another word, he turned and scampered into the house, not waiting for the explosion his words must provoke, nor did he bring up until safely behind the bolted door of his laboratory,

when, losing his miseries for the nonce in the unwonted glee of his discovery and the ludicrous fancies he connected with it, he guggled and hee-hawed till he was black in the face. Nor had he overdrawn the results of his sudden interpellation, for down in the schoolroom there had been an instant upheaval and a flying asunder, accompanied by savage exclamations and tremulous whisperings; then a heavy palm came down on the innocent night-light with prompt obliteration, and there followed a scuttling amongst forms and desks, and a painful spell of crouching silence, to be sharply broken by such rhetoric as this: 'Where's the old devil now?'

'I—I think I heard him run back to the house, Letty; sha'n't I hear about this to-morrow.'

'Well, never mind, Nemo, dear, now we're in for it, we must brazen it out. Who'd have thought the old reptile would have come sneaking down here at this time o' night?' Then, encouraged by the friendly obscurity, they came together and peered out of the schoolroom door. All was silence, so with a parting caress and a few furtive words they fled across the playground,—Sheepshead to pass the night in vigilant speculations and the love-smitten Angeletta to repair to her sister's bedside. . . .

When Conny brought her father his breakfast next morning, she put into his hands a clumsily-directed letter which had come by the first post. Mr Fledger, with a suspicious glance at the superscription, tears open the envelope and hastily scans the contents. Then he reads it again carefully and folds it away in his pocket with a sickly smile.

He is silent for a time, tapping with his fingers on the arms of his chair.

At length he speaks. 'I'm sorry to say, little girl, that your grandfather, is—er—very ill, in fact—dying, and I shall be obliged to go and see him. It's very unfortunate just now, very,' and Frederick belies himself with a sigh of satisfaction. Again he is quiet, save for the gobbling and guzzling he makes over his breakfast; but the meal finished he proceeds to business.

'Conny, get me my hat and throw some clean things in the carpet bag. You'll find it under your mother's bed, unless she's routed it out. Put in a couple of collars, a shirt, some handkerchiefs, and a comb and brush. Oh! and my ruler, out of the schoolroom. I must start at once. York's a long way off. That's where your grandfather lives; did I ever tell you?'

'No, father, but aunty did, and she told me that he was

only an old---'

"Well, never mind what she told you. I wish I had a "Bradshaw," little girl. But it doesn't signify; I must just run off and catch the first train I can. Say nothing about it to your mother, or your aunty, mind; let 'em find it out for themselves; it won't take 'em long, and don't tell that crew downstairs, 'specially old Buttox, that you seem to be so fond of. Damn those servants, everyone of 'em, I say. Now run along, Conny, and don't let anybody catch sight of that carpet bag,' and Mr Fledger, with a beauty-spot dawning in each of his pasty cheeks, in token of his roising emotions, shambles hurriedly about the room, with soap and dirty towel at the chemical sink, and snaggletoothed comb and mangy hair-brush in front of his piece of looking-glass, to get himself in trim for a race down to the railway station.

'Take me with you, father,' ventures Conny, appealingly,

as she pauses at the door.

'No, no, child, I can't. I would if I could, but I really

can't. Run along and fetch the things.'

Conny sorrowfully disappears, but when she returns, she entreats him again to take her, and breaks out in passionate supplications. 'Oh! do let me go with you, father; it'll be so dreadful to stay here alone. When they find out you're gone, they won't give me a bit of peace.'

'No! no! child,' was the petulant reply. 'What! take you to a death-bed and a funeral? Who ever heard of

such a thing?'

'Well, I never knew grandfather, so it wouldn't matter.

Do take me.'

'Nonsense, Conny, I shall do nothing of the kind. Now be a good girl and don't cry,' he adds, soothingly, as the forlorn little maid buries her face in her hands in tearful misery.

'There now'—kissing her—'I shall soon be back, worse luck, and then you'll be all right. You must keep up your pluck, you know. You can't be your father's girl, if you

don't keep up your pluck.' Then he goes over to his cupboard and pockets his money-bag; catches up his portmanteau, smoothes his hat with his coat-sleeve, and hastily breaking away from his weeping child, gives her a parting, slobbery kiss, and hastens out of the room. As he scurries across the hall, he snatches his overcoat off the antlers, then tiptoes out of the house, shutting the door with a gentle click. With commendable agility for so elderly a man, he leaps over the garden-wall, not venturing to set up a tell-tale clangour by opening the big front gates, which are right in a line with his lady's bedroom window. Once safely in the lane outside, he hies him down back-ways and by-ways to the railway station on the London Road, where he is fortunate enough to catch the 'down Parliamentary' just upon his arrival,—and he hugs himself at the thought of how cleverly he has managed to escape.

The ticket-clerk 'nudges' the station-master on the platform. 'That's Fledger, Mr Topton,' says he; 'that fellow at the academy there's all this fuss about. He's off to York; and I wonder what the dickens his little game is.'

And the invidious porters, gathered in a group, pass the wink to each other, and cock their thumbs over their shoulders at the principal, as he squeezes into a crowded compartment; and,—would you believe it, that imp of a buttons, who, for the good of the house, had started out after Mr Fledger, and kept him in sight all the way from home, bobs up suddenly at this juncture, forestalls an approaching porter in slamming the carriage-door, and, as he does so, grins and wags his head through the window at the dumbfoundered Frederick, just as that gentleman gets a first sight of him in taking his seat. 'I saw yer skin over the garden-wall, sir; and you did it so quiet, I thought, belikes, the perlice was after you, so I followed you down here to see what I could do.' The passengers prick up their ears. 'Why! you infernal young rasc—' 'Good-bye, sir; shall I say anything about it to the missus, sir?' But a final banging of carriage-doors, renders nugatory his master's fierce reply. 'Right—away!' shouts the guard, waving a hand of authority forwards. The eager engine shrieks and snorts, and hurling aloft her bursting steam, forges ahead with the ponderous train.

Afterwards, on the platform, Master Buttons finds himself

the centre of a gleeful group, that is brimful of urgent inquiries; for the station-master, the ticket-clerk, the collector and the porters, the 'young gentleman' who attends to the bookstall, and the 'ladies' who serve in the refreshment-room, all crowd round him and ply him with questions anent the affairs of Waltonbury House Academy; and Bobby fills all their mouths with high-seasoned information, and nods his cunning pate in endorsement of the 'Oh's!' and 'Ah's!'—the sneers and the jeers of his auditory.

In the meantime, our devoted principal, speeding away in the ever-widening distance, knows nothing of this fresh coalition, and stares out of the window with fine indifference, at the curious looks of those around him; or indulges in the ordinary railway-talk with his neighbours, sitting shoulder to shoulder. Thus, he journeys on, with stoppages galore, through all the 'Midland' country, with its widespread meadows and breezy wolds; its buxom towns and sleepy hamlets; till, in the hazy glamour of the autumn afternoon, he duly cometh to that famous old city of York. 'For Edinburgh and the North,' says a stout finger-post on the platform, as he steps out of the train; and there is something enticing in that 'Scotch Express' about to depart on the farther side of the bustling station. Oh! how far, thinks he, it would waft him from the scenes of his troubles and mortifications. Well, one of these days, perhaps; but it wasn't to be this time. So he turns aside with the outpouring crowd and wends his way into town.

CHAPTER XVII

LAPSTONES, NETHERSTONES AND FUNDAMENTALS

OLD Mr Filcher had been a remarkable man: ergo, one whose ways were open to the keenest criticism. I say this advisedly, because, although peculiar, he was in no sense distinguished; and because the hermit-like isolation in which he had of late years dwelt, had given him no oppor-

tunity to air those idiosyncrasies which, in former days, had graced his rôle of paterfamilias with so marked and singular a personality. It had arisen, you see, over this simple thing—to wit, Mr Filcher's superb belief in his marital and fatherly supremacy; the which was signally displayed by his methods of applying and maintaining the same; evincing, as he did so, such a quaint and forcible conscientiousness, that his humble household were fain to acquiesce in the unvarying rectitude of their chief; the more particularly, as these ordinances were accompanied by a specification that was as trenchant as it was temperless, though backed up very often by the convincing demonstrations of his ready right hand.

Do not mistake this worthy for a possible commander of the multitude, but believe him simply to be possessed of a pragmatic, domineering spirit, to which he accorded a safe license within the walls of his most exiguous dwelling, and there only. In this, his astute limitation, it will appear to you that old Mr Filcher was commendably temperate and politic; bearing in mind, as I daresay he did, how frequently

'vaulting ambition doth o'erleap itself.'

Old Filcher was a shoemaker—by practice, a cobbler—as indeed hath appeared to you, though he lacked not the ability to make boots and shoes or to do other dexterous things; but he had been wanting all along, in that business-like 'push' which would have prompted him to emerge from his little den in Turpin Alley, where, being delightedly his own landlord, he paid no rent, and to start a fine shop in a leading thoroughfare, where the 'respectable people' of York might be counted upon to patronise him. Still, though wanting in enterprise, he was a plodding worker, squatting in his shop all day, and seldom going abroad of an evening; tirelessly vehement, too, if not energetic.

He had saved a little money, but his sordid nature would never dare an outlay for the very best chance of a broad success. So he grubbed away his life upon a three-legged stool; a long, leather apron for his daily caparison; his shirt-sleeves tucked back from his shaggy arms; and his legs akimbo about his lowly seat. From a nail behind him hung a much-used, lissome strap, and on a shelf, at his elbow, reposed a bundle of Saturday Magazines and some Knight's Miscellanies (they were thought a good

deal of in those days), together with a dog-eared Rasselas, and a veteran encyclopædia; and these served him by turns for mental pabulum when work was slack, or the humour took him to stretch his limbs, or lift himself away from his lapstone and hammer. Over his door you saw a swinging sign-board,—dingy and weather-stained, whereon was painted that cobbler's shibboleth of a Wellington boot. In a semicircle above it appeared his name and trade; while set forth underneath in strong italics, was the universal succinct of his craft—'Repairs neatly executed.' And sometimes. though it wasn't often, when Æolus flung his arms into Turpin Alley, that crazy board would creak and groan on its rusty hinges by the hour together; and you may take my word for it, that was the only stir the House of Filcher ever made in the outside world, so sublimely self-continent was the owner thereof.

Mrs Filcher was a good kind of creature, gentle and pious, though mildly infirm with the failings of woman. She was patiently affectionate and inherently virtuous; and being all this, she was far superior to Filcher, and how she came to marry him is a mystery, for Filcher was crook-legged, stunted, swarthy and hideous—a veritable 'Black Dwarf'; while we may say of her—though neither well-educated nor beautiful—that she was pink-skinned and pretty, young and unoffered in the matrimonial mart, what time she yielded him her luckless hand.

Now, the issue of this ill-assorted pair, were exceedingly implex,—uncertain of temper, and contradictory in character; their component parts being too violently opposed for the possibility of any moral consistency, though the father's impress was the radical one.

There was Toby—named after his father; and Becky—the mother's namesake; and Frederick—our own particular Fledger—who, in the apogee of his subsequent flight from the paternal sphere, had dubbed himself Horatio and revised his family name; and the manifold imperfections of these three children, and of the mother who gave them birth, were so upstart and inordinate, according to the cobbler's gaze, that he was 'in dooty bound' frequently to 'correct' them.

Peradventure a sample or two of his proceedings on this head will not be out of place; though, should you conclude,

before I have done with him, that this Toby Filcher was as cold-blooded and tyrannical an old reptile as ever drew the breath of life, I couldn't find an argument to alter your

opinion.

'Tobias, my son,' remarks the elder Filcher to his first-born one evening, as the family is sitting down to supper, 'I've been asking your sister about you, and she tells me you've been upstairs on the bed all day. Now, didn't I tell yer to go to school this morning?' 'Yes, father; but I wasn't well, and I don't feel well now; and mother said she didn't think it 'ud matter if I stopt at home, just for a day, to see what was ailing me' (the poor little chap was sickening for the measles), 'so I went and laid down; but it hasn't done me any good, and I can't eat any-

thing.

'Öh! Is that the way you encourage the children to dis-obey their father, Tib?' queries the elder Toby, turning to his wife, whom he often calls 'Tib,' by way of a skit upon her partiality for pussies. 'Why, yes, Filcher,' she replies, falteringly; 'don't you see the boy's quite ill?' 'No, Tib, I don't. He's got a feverish cold, and he must shake it off like his old father has to do when he gets one, as I remarked to him when he wanted to shirk his dooties this morning. Now, don't you ever set him up against his farthor again, Rebecca; because if yer do-though I shouldn't like to strike ye, bein' as you're only a woman. understand—I'll think out some way to stop yer from doin' it again; do yer hear me, Tib?' 'Of course I do, Filcher; I meant no harm, I only-' 'Very well, Tib; don't forget it, then,' rejoins the griffin, overbearing his wife's explanation with a dirty forefinger. 'Now, Tobias, my son, listen to me'-and his speech is drawling and dogmatic-'I've get a little job I must do this evening, so I can't attend to yer just now; but to-morrow morning, as soon as ever you hear me stirring, you jump out of bed and fetch that strap in the shop, and take it up in the spare room, and wait there while I'm a-dressin' myself; I won't keep yer very long, my son; and then yer farthor'll correct yer; do yer hear me, Toby?' 'Yes, father,' replies the unfortunate, and his voice is drawling, too; whereupon, nothing further is said upon the subject, and the meal proceeds in silence, save for some readings from 'The Temple of Juggernaut,' in the Satur-

LAPSTONES, NETHERSTONES AND FUNDAMENTALS

day Magazine, mouthed out by Filcher père, for the edification of his dumb and brow-beaten family.

Next morning, early, that poor little Toby, in his nightshirt and trousers—taught the virtue of obedience by many a previous flogging—creeps, sick and shivering, into the chamber of punishment—the lissome strap dangling from his limp, unwilling hands. In a few moments his father enters and locks the door. 'So here you are, my son; are you ready?' inquires old Toby, taking hold of the strap. 'Yes, farthor; but I feel very ill, and I'm so cold,' whimpers the poor boy. 'That's what you said yesterday, Toby; of course you're cold, for you've got a cold; but a cold, understand, isn't an illness, my son; it's only a distemper. You want yer blood warmed a bit, and I'm a-goin' to do Let down yer britches, Toby.' The victim tremblingly obeys, the hot tears dropping from his fevered eyes, and his parched lips twitching in dread anticipation. 'Not too hard, father; oh, not too hard; I can't bear it,' he cries; and then, that white-livered, sturdy ruffian, who, in begetting this child for such a cruelty, committed a heinous crime, grasps his boy's top-knot in his ample left hand, to keep him from 'running about under correction,' and lashes his poor back and naked, quivering legs with all the monster might of his sinewy arm, until the victim's shrieks and groans and wild entreaties resound through the house.

Rattle! rattle! Bang, thump, bang, came the

mother's frenzied efforts against the unvielding door.

'Oh! Filcher, Filcher, for God's sake stop it,' she cries,

'you'll kill that boy, you brute, you will.'

'Keep calm, Rebecca,' calls out the callous fiend inside.
'I'm only correcting the lad, and you know I never do that in a temper. Of course he doesn't like it, but I want him to obey me and grow up a credit to his old farthor, and if I spare the rod I spoil the child, yer know.' Swish! thrapp! thra-ash!—rattle! rattle! rattle!—bang!

'Let me in, Filcher; open the door.'

'Now, don't get excited, Tib; mind yer own business and go back to bed, or I shall have to make yer. You'll catch your death o' cold standing out there in your night-shift,' then he gives the little sufferer two or three parting lashes over his neck and shoulders. 'There, my son,' says he, 'perhaps, another time, when I tell yer to do anything,—

you'll do it, whether yer mother sets her head against me or not.' Then he opens the door and permits poor Toby to run back to his room, followed by his weeping mother, who lays him tenderly in his bed and tries to soothe the weals

that are rising all over his body.

'The cruel brute. Oh! the inhuman, cruel brute,' she moans. 'My poor child, my poor boy,' and she presses his aching head to her heaving breast. 'Oh! why should I have to submit to such things as this?' and she tries to kiss away his groans, and gently covers up his burning limbs with the bedclothes, his arms clinging tremulously round her neck.

Meanwhile, old Filcher walks calmly downstairs, hangs up his strap, washes his hands and face at the kitchen sink, lights the fire, fries himself a rasher of bacon and a couple of eggs, boils some coffee, and sits down to the enjoyment of a quiet though early breakfast, with plenty of bread and butter and a fresh number of the *Saturday Magazine*.

Later in the day, as he crouches over his cobbling, he is surprised by a visit from the parish doctor, when the following foreright and unceremonious conversation ensues:—

'You're Filcher, I presume?'

'Certainly, sir, that is my name. Your pleasure, sir?'

'Well, I'm Doctor Squills, of the infirmary, if you don't happen to know me. I was fetched to see your little boy upstairs. I find he has the measles, and he's going to have them pretty badly too. I also find he's in a high fever, owing, more than anything else, to a severe flogging which you gave him this morning. My God! sir, it's scandalous how you've knocked that poor little fellow about; why, he's covered with bruises from head to foot. I tell you plainly, Filcher, should this case result fatally, which I consider quite possible, I shall hand you over to the police.'

There was an awkward pause, while Filcher gave an old

shoe on his lap a most particular banging.

'Well, sir, what do you say for yourself?' demanded the doctor. 'You don't deny the abominable cruelty, I

presume?'

'Dr Squeal, or whatever your name is, *I do*. My son had been disobedient, and I considered it my dooty to correct him for it. If I'd a-known he was going to be ill, I'd a-put it off till he got better, but I only thought he had

a cold comin' on, so how am I to blame? Besides which,' he continued, bristling up, 'I have a perfect right to correct a child of mine whenever I please, without consulting anybody, whether they enter my premises by the front door—as they ought, or sneak in at the back—like a thief, as you

did,' and he scowled at the doctor like a satyr.

'Give me none of your damned insolence, Filcher,' replied the doctor, 'or I'll make it all the worse for you. I walked into these premises by the way your wife led me, and I tell you again,' and he shook an exasperated fist at the evil old Crispin, 'if this boy of yours should die, I'll haul you up before the authorities, double quick, back door or front door, and when they learn the facts of the case, they'll consider it their duty to correct you. I shall be here again to-morrow morning, mind, and I advise you for the future to keep a civil tongue in your head,' and the enraged Squills turned upon his heel and departed, leaving old Filcher considerably nonplussed. . . .

'So you went for medical help on the quiet, did you, Mrs Filcher?' remarked the elder Toby as he walked into little Toby's bedroom, 'and when you got him here you hatched up a nice tale about the hiding I'd been giving my son, and showed him the marks the strap made, so as to

get your husband into trouble, eh, Tib?'

'Well, Filcher, I did go for the doctor,' was the reply, but you'd knocked the child about that shameful, I was frightened, and had to go. But I didn't tell him a word, Filcher, but what he made me. "Why, the child's got the measles," he says, directly he set eyes on him. "Why, what's this?" he says presently, looking at that cut on his face; then he turned down the bedclothes and examined him all over. "Why, he's had a beating—a severe beating too; who, in Heaven's name, has had the heart to do this to a boy in such a condition?" Then he made me tell him all the particulars, and he went on frightfully, and was going to have you taken up before the magistrates, only I begged him not to, for if he did, it would be the ruin of us and then he promised to think it over.'

'Which is all very pleasant information,' replied the old cobbler, 'but now you listen to me, Mrs Filcher, and don't say a word more, because I've heard enough of your clack to serve me for a long time. You did very wrong, Tib, in going for that doctor without asking me, and worse still, by sneakin' him in by the back door, so as I shouldn't have a chance to kick his carcass out of my place. Very wrong, Tib, and though I won't strike yer for it, bein' as you're only a woman, understand, yet I'll think of something, bimeby, as'll stop yer from ever doin' it again. Mark me that, Mrs Filcher.'

'Oh, I don't doubt it,' replied the woman; 'it'll be just

like you; I don't believe you'd care if Toby died.'

'Yes, I should, Tib, very much indeed; but when I tell him to do anything, I don't want it to go in at one ear and out at the other. I want him to be obedient and grow up a credit to his old farthor.' Then he tramped off downstairs again, and hammered and hammered his old shoes all that afternoon with quite supererogatory vehemence.

Well, little Toby got worse, and for weeks his life wavered in the balance, whereat old Filcher was exceedingly glum and mum, coming upstairs every afternoon to lean on his chin over the foot of his boy's bed, weighing his chances of recovery, and taking care to avoid Dr Squills when it was

time for that gentleman to make his appearance.

Ultimately, Toby got well again, although it was a long time first, and after 'Becky' and 'Baby Fred' had been down with the measles too, and had got up again, affairs moved along in their accustomed groove, and old Filcher, pounding away on his lapstone, his peascod of a heart filled with acrid revenges, bethought him day by day—how most 'emphatically' he could 'correct' his wife for fetching the doctor.

One fine day a fancy struck him, and the fates were with him. He was alone; Mrs Filcher had taken the children to a festival at the Minster—and he knew they would be absent for an hour or two. It was a February morning, sickly-sunny, chill and still, and his Rebecca's cats, four in number without counting the kittens, lay in a somnolent group on the kitchen door-step, where a beam of sunshine, coming down upon them aslant, was coaxing their vitals to a rudimentary purr and setting the kittens a-frisking over their mothers' backs. Old Filcher, slack of work, with his Rasselas in hand, stood and looked at them, and as he gazed, an atrocious smile crept over his ugly visage; some

devil's imp was prompting him with a scoundrel suggestion. He chuckled to himself, laid down his Rasselas and took up the garden spade. Then he dug a long trench in front of the kitchen door, the kittens playing about his heels. When this was done, he grinned a devilish grin, put on a pair of old gardening gloves, seized the pussies one after another by the tail, careless of talons or teeth, and with a mighty swing of his muscular arm, dashed out their brains against the garden wall. The slaughter completed, he laid their 'carcasses' head downwards in the trench, pulled up their tails an inch or so above the surface as he filled in the earth around them, and smoothed the grave over, with those tufts of mystery sprouting out of it. Then he soused the brain-bespattered wall with a pail or two of water, and scraped some mould over the blood-spots on the ground, and taking a final look at his work, scratched his chin in critical approval, went and sat down in the shop—and fortified his mind with some more Rasselas, reverting afterwards to his Saturday Magazines. All in good time, Rebecca and the children reappeared, hungering for their dinners and solicitous for the pussies.

'So here you are, Tib, back again,' growled the old curmudgeon. 'I've been doin' a little diggin' and plantin' whilst you've been away. It's gettin' to be spring, yer know, and I want yer to tidy up a bit out there. I didn't have time myself, so take the broom and see what you can do.'

'Very well, Filcher,' was the meek reply. 'Becky, I don't see the cats anywhere,' scrutinising in the kitchen and washhouse; 'they're up on my bed again; go and drive 'em down.' Then, divesting herself of her outdoor apparel, she caught up broom and shovel and went into the yard to doher lord's bidding, like the dutiful wife that she was.

'Clean up well round the back door, Tib,' called out old Filcher as he watched her depart. 'I don't want the children to tread the muck into the house,' and he settled himself down on his three-legged stool and studied his Rasselas—topsy-turvy. Rebecca began to sweep in the only spot where sweeping was necessary, and the crumbled earth gave readily to her broom, but there were six or seven plague spots that wouldn't be done away, so she stooped down to pluck them out, and it was then that a consternation seized her.

'Why! they're my cats' tails,' she screamed. 'That Filcher has killed my cats, every one of 'em,' and she nearly fainted on the spot at the horrible discovery. A few moments of gasping weakness and she jumped up and ran into old Filcher. 'Oh! Toby, you beast, you cruel wretch!' she exclaimed, 'how could you? You've murdered all my poor cats, you know you have. You spiteful beast, you cruel, heartless wretch. What have those innocents ever done

to you, I should like to know?'

'Now keep calm, Tib, and control yourself,' replied the savage, spreading out a deprecating hand towards her, 'don't you see how calm I am, though you are trying your best to jump down my throat. I'm very sorry, Mrs Filcher, but it had to be done. Those cats of yours were always messing about the place; besides, they cost too much for their keep. I can't support a menargery, and it goes agen my stomach to be always a-cleanin' up after 'em. I wouldn't a-minded, understand, if you'd a-been satisfied with one cat. But no, Tib, you kept on gettin' more and more all the while, and wastin' yer time over 'em to the neglect of yer dooties, so yer see yerself, I was obliged to correct yer. So I did away with the lot, and a good thing too. Besides, Mrs Filcher, there was that little matter of fetchin' the doctor—hangin' on my hands, and I was in dooty bound to correct ver for that, and he gave the poor woman a villainous leer. 'Now just you take my advice, Rebecca,—sit down there in the corner and relieve yer feelin's with a good blubber. Never mind me, I won't laugh at yer, if I can help myself; and I tell yer in a quarter of an hour you'll have gotten over it, that is, unless you're a worse idyot than I ever took yer for, and that can hardly be. Besides, Tib, yer husband's a-gettin' lear for the want of his dinner and so are the children, sayin' nothin' about yerself; so if you'll make yer grief as short as you can, then cook the fam'ly somethin' to eat, I shall feel greatly obliged to yer.' And the old devilskin, chuckling all through him, from his belly to his chaps, turned round on his stool and plodded along at his cobbling.

Well, Mrs Filcher did have a cry, not 'down in a corner,' but upstairs on the bed, her face buried in her hands, her frail body heaving with hysterical sobs, with Toby and Becky cuddling round her neck and weeping in concert.

There was no dinner that day for anybody until the evening, and then it was a very sorry one, and Rebecca for the first time declared herself in open rebellion. There followed a season of growlings and strife, unheeded commands and cold-blooded reprisals, savagery on the one side and defiance on the other, and the 'fam'ly' kicked up such a rumpus between them that the neighbours in Turpin Alley, when it drew dusk, used to walk up and down outside the cobblery to catch 'the partiklars of what was goin' on.'

Several months wore away under these trying conditions, and one day Mrs Filcher took Becky out to buy her a new hat. Now Becky was a 'growing girl,' and although born and bred in Turpin Alley, was beginning to evince that fondness for finery which obtains with her sex under every condition. So she persuaded her mother to choose her a fetchy affair in 'Tuscan flop,' dandily trimmed with ribbons and feathers. And as soon as old Filcher caught sight of it upon her head, he growled like a savage bear.

'Ugh-h, so you've been doin' your best to make my daughter look like a gal o' the town, Mrs Filcher, have

ver?' he remarked.

'Well, upon my word, Filcher, what will you say next?' demanded the wife.

'I shall say next—whatever I think proper, Rebecca, and I tell yer straight when you tog a gal out in a hat like that—you make her look like a loose hussy. 'Taint a fit thing for a gal o' mine, and I won't let her wear it. Becky, you come back this minute' (she was about to escape out of the shop door), 'and take that hat off and give it to me; and if yer must go out just now put on yer old one, for though it's rather off wear, it's decent and becomin', and he beckoned her back with a prone forefinger that reached out unmistakably for obedience.

There followed a painful scene. Becky came back, as a matter of course, tossed the hat on to her father's bench, then went off upstairs to her bedroom for the rest of the day; while her mother 'had words' about it with her father (very acrimonious words), culminating in a refusal to get the dinner, which made old Filcher as pleasant as a panther and almost as dangerous. So when night came, he waited for the 'fam'ly' to go to bed, then he cast the 'Tuscan flop' upon the embers of the kitchen fire, watched

it burn up with satisfaction, and warmed his hands over its smoking remains.

In the morning he told the offenders what he had done, and entered didactically into his reasons for doing it; but mother and daughter remained singularly unaccordant. In fact there was another lamentable scene, in which Becky so far forgot herself as to jump up and throw her old hat on to the fire 'to follow the new one,' remarking to her father, with amazing temerity, that if she couldn't 'go about respectable like other girls,' she'd 'stay at home altogether.' Whereupon the father's correction took the form of a box on the ears, and Becky and her mother went into hysterics. Sympathetic Toby at this, forgot himself, and 'cheeked his farthor,' and 'Baby Fred' sent up an incontinent howl, by way of chorus.

The two Rebecca's were now drenched with water in betterment of their hysterics. Freddy was taken upstairs and thrown on to the bed, netherly spanked by a heavy hand, and left to howl 'till he got tired'; while up in the empty room, directly afterwards, poor Toby's back renewed its acquaintance with the strap of correction, and old Filcher, having effected these various disciplines, betook himself to the pavement of Turpin Alley, 'to get away from the noise,' and walked up and down in front of his shop until the attentions of his neighbours made it advisable to return to his humble dwelling, where he put up his one little shutter and locked the door; and for the next few days in that cobblery—there was 'hell upon earth,' as those neighbours afterwards described it.

In the midst of these acerbities Becky was taken down with a low fever, according to the dictum of the advisory Squills, and was called to a better home, poor girl, within a fortnight. At the funeral her mother bore up bravely, but when they took her back to her dismal abode she broke down completely. Filcher, who had been somewhat humbled—I don't say softened—by the recent lamentable demise, pulled up the window blinds, but that didn't effect any improvement; so, sitting down beside her, he proceeded to make an awkward attempt at consolation, but was immediately repulsed.

'Don't, Filcher. Now don't, I tell you; you can save your breath so far as I'm concerned, for nothing shall come

between my mind's eye and that poor child. You've been the cause of her death—you know you have—like you'll be mine if I stay in this vile place much longer. I wouldn't be in your shoes—no, nor have a conscience like yours—for all the money in the world. Let me alone now! That sort of thing between us is ended long ago, mind,' and she drew herself away with a repugnance unmistakable, from the ill-timed advances of his prurient arm.

the ill-timed advances of his prurient arm.

Old Filcher straightened up and growled, took himself off into the shop and sought consolation in the pages of his Rasselas. He had trodden upon his worm until she had turned. He had filled her gentle breast with bitterness and sorrow—never according her one single thing for which the heart of a woman instinctively craves, and, in this, her hour of desolation, she resolved to leave him, and she cast about in her mind for some haven of shelter.

Her father and mother had been dead for years, and her other relations in York could but ill afford to provide her with an asylum, but there was an uncle on her mother's side whose favourite she had been when a girl, and who was in fairly prosperous circumstances. This uncle had gone to live in the little village of Kendon, in Easthamptonshire, where he carried on the business of a cooper and wheelwright. To him, therefore, she wrote in her extremity, telling him everything.

Several letters passed between them, but when her kindhearted kinsman understood all, he invited her to come and stay with him as long as she chose. She had contrived, in view of possible contingencies, to crimp a few savings out of the niggardly housekeeping money, and these were sufficient to pay for her journey to Kendon and to provide her besides with some trifling necessaries. So one day, about a month after Becky's funeral, she escaped from the cobblery by the back door, while Filcher was hammering his old shoes, and taking 'Baby Fred' and a small bundle along with her, set out upon her journey, arriving in due course at the wheelwright's rural home.

She was received with open arms, and treated with every kindness. She found the locality a beautiful one, and the air seemed warm and sweet by comparison with that of her northern home. Her surroundings, too, were pleasant and peaceful—in contrast with the squalor and hubbub of

Turpin Alley. It was autumn, and her uncle's garden was gay with brilliant asters and glowing dahlias. In the workshops behind the house there arose a merry chorus, not unmusical,—thumpings, clatterings and measured clanging, softened with the sounds of cheery enjoinder and good-tempered repartee, and these afforded her a grateful variation to the monotonous leathering at the cobblery. The village people, too, seemed winsome, so that everything wooed her to ignore the past and to enter upon a new life, responsive to these kindly suscitations. But it was not to be. The distresses of her former days had sapped her constitution, which, at all times delicate, now suddenly succumbed, and she fell into a rapid consumption.

They nursed her with the utmost solicitude, but nothing checked the progress of her mortal ailment. Resigned, but broken hearted, she passed away less than six months after

she had come to her uncle's home.

They buried her in the graveyard of 'Old Kendon Church,' and they put up a modest tombstone to her memory, but never a word did her uncle send to that old curmudgeon at York; and Filcher, who had acquiesced in the separation, and become encysted with his own conceits, only heard of his wife's death some seven years afterwards; whereupon he raised a most portentous howl with the folks at Kendon, shedding an abundance of crocodile tears upon his writing paper, and demanding that his son should be immediately sent back to him,—a request which could not be effectively refused. So our incipient Frederick returned to York, much against his will, to be planted upon the vacant stool of his departed brother Toby, who, having learnt his trade, had long since flitted from the paternal nest, and had grown up 'a credit to his old farthor.'

That our youthful Frederick did not stay with his old parent a moment longer than he could help, nor learn from him with any complacency, you have heard before, and will take for granted; and yet the flight of his son, completing as it did the defection of Filcher's 'fam'ly,' did by no means bring down the old man's 'grey hairs with sorrow to the grave.' No; unbent and unbroken still, he trundled along in the old rut—caring for no one, consorting with no one, agreeing with no one; cogitating, paring, stitching and hammering from morning till night, winter and summer,

year in and year out; and he pinched and screwed in everything as much as he was able. His clothing cost him little or nothing, his food was of the coarsest and commonest, and all through the winters he never made him a fire except for his cooking, and when that was done he emptied the tea-kettle upon the scattered embers. Thus he managed to 'put away' nearly all that he earned for his 'old age,' though he might have forejudged it would never be needed, for such men as he mostly die in their harness; and after a long, long life of graceless slavery and biting parsimony, that was what happened to him; for one day, as he was crouching and cobbling in his 'shop,' he was seized with a deadly vomiting, and something told him his end was near. So he called to a neighbour to fetch him the doctor, painfully scribbled a message to his son Toby at Middlesborough, and crawled up to bed, where he shivered and groaned all night under his ragged quilt. The doctor came, but could do him no good. The next morning Toby came also, but he was too late for a parting word. Single-souled Filcher had breathed his last.

Toby leaned over the back of a chair and pondered as he gazed upon the face of the unlovely dead; then he called in some of the neighbours and made a seemly display of filial grief. Afterwards he talked those people off the premises by dint of his convenient cant, and devoted the remainder of the day to a thorough ransacking of the house, and to a search over the city of York, for that particular ghoul whose 'undertaking' might be secured at the smallest possible cost. With satisfactory results achieved from these activities, he sat him down in the evening to a meagre, cold repast, abstracted from a cupboard in the kitchen, and wrote the subjoined affecting epistle to his brother Frederick

before seeking his rest:—

'Turpin Alley, York.

'DEAR FRED, — Father died this morning about six o'clock. I did not get here soon enough to see the last of him. The doctor tells me it was paralysis of the bowels, caused by catching cold on an empty stomach.

'I thought I had better write to you, Fred, in case you wanted to go to the funeral, though it would be a long way for you to come, and you couldn't do any good now the

poor old man's gone.

'So very likely you would rather not come, and save the expense of the journey; and it won't matter, I assure you, for I shall make it my duty to see that everything is properly carried out, and after the funeral I will send you your rightful share of all what father has left, which is much less than I thought it would be.

'So no more at the present.—From your affectionate brother, Tobias.'

Now this was the missive which had brought Mr Fledger in such a hurry to York, despite its non-exigent phraseology, for, reading it between the lines—as he craftily did, it had seemed to him a very peremptory summons indeed.

Old Filcher's grizzled sign-board dangled by one corner, from its rusty bracket, swinging out its last groans in measure with the dying breeze; no longer was it a pledge for the cobbler's activities. The dirt-coated tenement was blank and sightless; its grimy door was locked and bolted, and a parched and dismal shutter was fastened up askew at the little shop window.

Mr Fledger mounted the narrow flight of foot-worn steps and stood upon the iron-railed flagstone above. With dim, unwelcome memory, he glanced around him, rapping at the door for admittance, while the denizens of the court, elbowed together in groups of evening indolence, whispered and confabulated, quizzed and sniggered—for broadcloth respectability, however plausible of caste, was but a rare intruder upon the côteries of Turpin Alley. The fastenings were loosened, a quick-closing entrance was given him, and our Fledge found himself face to face with his brother, whom he had not set eyes upon for many a long year. Curious and dubious, they eyed each other, then flabbily shook hands.

Tobias Filcher was our hero's senior, and did not resemble him in anything save his dank black hair and vulture nose. In other respects he was like his father had been, swarthy and saturnine, and a wooden smirk that had settled round his mouth betokened his exceeding insincerity.

'So you've come, Frederick, after all, was his brotherly greeting.

'After all what, eh? After your manœuvres to keep me away, I suppose,' was the peppery retort.

'Why, no, Fred, no. I never manœuvred to keep you away; but you've stuck yerself up above the fam'ly so long, that I thought, maybe, that you was too great a man to

come down here to yer father's funeral.'

'Great, be damned!' was the petulant reply; 'I'm no greater than you are; in fact, just now I feel exceedingly small, for things are going to the devil with me, headlong. What a den this is,' he concluded, poking his long nose about him and sniffing at the sickly odours that came out of the sty-baked kitchen. 'Where's father? I want to see him.'

Tobias, without reply, led the way up the dark, rickety staircase into the squalid chamber of death. The undertakers had not yet brought the coffin, and old Filcher lay upon the bed, very much as he had died. Toby approached and took down the coverlet from his father's face, and the brothers stood together and gazed upon their dead as if they were looking at a waxwork.

'Father was never a handsome man, was he?' remarked

Fledger, at last.

'Can't say he was. Fam'ly failing, yer know,' curtly replied the brother, with a true copy of his father's favourite

Again for a while the two were silent, their eyes still bent upon the dead man's face, the wrinkles of which, like fine lacework, were ramified all over the livid skin.

'How old was he?' queried Frederick.

'Well, I don't know of myself, no more than you do; but here's an old book I found at the bottom of that there chest,' and he picked up a cramped and venerable Bible, dog-eared, black and dislocated, which was lying on a chair, and handed it to his brother. 'That'll tell yer something about it.'

Mr Fledger turned over the cover, and on the stained and crumpled flyleaf read these words, which had been written in roundhand and embellished with dots and curlycues, though the brown and faded characters were almost illegible :---

> 'Tobias Filcher, His Book. MARCH 14, 1785, AGED 10 YEARS AND 3 MONTHS.'

'H'm, reads like an epitaph; but, bless my soul! this makes father over ninety years of age,' exclaimed Frederick.

'Well, doesn't he look it?' responded Toby.

'He certainly does. I don't remember seeing this book,

though, before.'

'Very likely not; but I remember seein' it, and feelin' it too, many's a time. That old man used to make me sit down on my haunches and read to him out of it almost every mornin' while he was at work. That was the time you was a babby, and when I stumbled over the crackjaw names, or he couldn't hear me properly for the row he was makin' with his boots, he'd take that book from me and correct me over the head with it that awful hard that it 'ud likely as not make my nose burst out a-bleedin'. 'Deed, that's how it got so knocked about's my belief.'

'That was just like father, wasn't it?' remarked Mr Fledger. 'He never could keep his hands off us long together; and poor mother he used to serve just as bad, in a different way. Well, he won't do any of his nice old tricks again. Let's cover him up and go downstairs.'

So they covered him up and tramped doggedly down, one after the other, into the dark, malodorous kitchen; and when they had seated themselves opposite a starveling supper—a tallow candle stuck in a box between them—they proceeded to enliven their refection with a dialogue like this, as with greasy grip they gnawed at intervals at the residuary bones of a cold neck of mutton,—

'Well, Toby, you've had a fine opportunity to turn over the old man's traps, haven't you? I'll bet you've done it

too, up to the knocker.'

'What d'you mean, Fred? Of course I've looked over

farther's things. That's natural, isn't it?'

'Oh, of course it is; nothing more natural. But what did you find, Toby? How about the money father's been

saving all these years, and where is it?'

'Now, look you here, Fred—I don't want for you to be nasty, because if you're nasty I shall be nasty too; and that 'ud be a pity, for I'm a-tryin' to do my duty by yer, as a brother should'; and he got up and went to the cupboard, and drew forth from a rat-hole in the bottom corner a dirty brown sock of bygone make, three parts full with the coveted specie, and tied round with a boot-lace. 'There, Fred,'

said he, as he laid it on the table; 'there's every farthing I've been able to find, as true as God's my judge, and you know I wouldn't say that to a lie.'

'Why not, pray? You're not much of a saint, if your face is anything to go by'; and brother Fred gulped down a fragment of mutton-bone in mistake for a piece of meat,

and it almost choked him.

'I look quite as much a saint as you do, Fred; and don't choke yerself, or you'll not want the money that is rightfully comin' to you. Besides, if you won't believe what I say, why don't yer go and look for yerself? I've routed the house over from top to bottom, and I tell yer it's every scurrick I can find.'

'I daresay, Toby, I daresay. But I wish I'd been here as soon as you, or a little sooner, that's all. I remember this old stocking pretty well; there was a pair of 'em, and father used to put his gold in one and his silver in the other. Now, Toby, you canting old prig, where's that other sock?' and Mr Fledger, flaring up, thumped the table with his knife-clenched fist.

'Fred, I swear by all that's sacred I never found any other sock. I know there was another, but I suppose farther of late years put his money all in this one; and that's exactly how I found it, under a loose bit of floorboard in his bedroom cupboard, and I haven't taken a penny out—only to

count it.

Then he untied the sock and emptied it upon the table, making a goodly pile. There were sovereigns and half-sovereigns, crowns and half-crowns, shillings and sixpences, in delectable plenty, and our Frederick gloated over them as he scooped them up for counting.

'How much do you say there is here, Toby?'

'Three hundred and seventy pound, ten, I make it, Fred.'

'Well, we shall soon see,' was the rejoinder, and the

counting went on assiduously.

'Correct!' ejaculated Fledger, as, the reckoning concluded, he shovelled the coin back into the sock. 'We'll divide that between us before I go away. Put it back where you took it from, and let's go to bed. To-morrow morning, I'm going to hunt for the other stocking.'

The brother's only response was an assenting grunt, and

returning the money to its hiding-place, he took up the box and candle and led the way upstairs to a bare bedroom where, laying themselves down without any finnikin preliminaries, back to back, upon an old mattress, they dragged the ragged bedclothes over them, and presumably, went to sleep.

Early next morning, another canine repast was followed by a persistent hunt, high and low, over the old house, on Frederick's part, for that missing old sock; though he felt that his brother had already diddled him and he had little hope of finding it. Toby lent him a helping hand, and all day long, they groped and ferreted amidst the accumulated rubbish of many sordid years; but they found not the sock; and tired out and disgusted, our hero gave up the quest.

'I'll be bound to be hung, if you don't know where that sock is, though, Toby. You've sneaked it away somewheres.' he savagely remarked, shaking his fist in his brother's face, when they sat down in the evening, as dirty as tinkers, to a 'snack' of bread and cheese and some cold coffee.

'Now do be reasonable, Fred,' the other replied. 'I shouldn't have the heart to do a thing like that to a brother o' mine.'

'Toby, you drop your cant; It doesn't go down with me, I tell you. Why, if your heart's as ugly as your face, you'd do that or any other devilish thing.'

'Upon my soul, Fred, this is too much. I shall loose my temper over yer, if I am yer brother. If I was like farther

now, I should strike yer for it, and pretty hard too.

'Oh, you're like your beautiful father all right. He never struck anybody his own size, I'll wager, for fear he might get a licking himself, and you won't strike me either, for the same reason; besides, it wouldn't pay just now, Toby, it wouldn't pay,' and our checkmated Frederick betook himself to the backyard, and prowled up and down like a caged hyena.

Alas! for our Fledge, to be so repeatedly the sport of fortune. Now, had a nixie, in the nick of time, only tickled his ear with a pat suggestion, how easily could he have turned the tables upon rascal Toby; simply, too, by turning over the sod at a point in front of him. Yes, for right under his nose, as he halted in his pacings, down beneath an old flowerpot hidden in the weeds, his innocent brother, so upright and blameless, had secretly planted,

only the second night before, a foot of a sock that was crammed almost to bursting, with some six hundred and fifty pounds sterling of their 'old farthor's 'savings.

And that self-same candle, stuck upon a box, which had ministered so blandly at their evening colloquy, perched upon the ash-bin by his stealthy hand, had been the single witness to that snug but wrongful midnight sequestration.

CHAPTER XVIII

INITIAL MARKS AND FOOTFALLS

THE funeral was over.

Mr Fledger had sat in the mourning-coach, so rickety and featherless, beside his rogue brother, while they joggled along to the cemetery, behind a pair of thin-barrelled, shambleshanked, stilted black horses, bedraggled in rusty black. He had stood at the graveside, veiling the dearth of his tears, like his brother, with a pocket handkerchief—an impassive unit in the heartless exequies; save when a hollow reminder of his own mortality came up to him, as the clods fell upon Ay, ay, 'dust to dust; ashes to his father's coffin. ashes,' that was it, and so it must always be; then, with the perfunctory parson's oily promises lying idle in his ears—'of a blessed resurrection for the dear departed,' he had ambled back in that shabby tumbrel to the vacant cobblery in Turpin Alley.

Afterwards, while Toby delved in the kitchen cupboard for the 'five pound ten' that was to pay the undertakers, he had doled out a parting glass of gin to the expectant Mr Pallson and his men—whilst they scrambled together those

veteran properties that had garnished the grave.

And when the undertakers had gone, he had tossed off the tailings of the gin-bottle and had gone and sat down in the kitchen, with the impossible Toby, to have another 'shine' with him about 'that money,' and they had wrangled and sworn and threatened one another until it was one o'clock; when our Frederick had bounced out of the cobblery to an

eating-house hard by, to be followed by the wary Toby, who sneaked off to a cheaper establishment.

'Damn that fellow Toby; what a starve-guts it is,' exclaimed our Fledge to himself, as he sought the casement of a high-backed seat in the eating-room of the 'Yorkshire Stingo,' and proceeded to do justice to a piping hot leg of pork, served up with apple-sauce and mashed potatoes, and backed with a bottle of old ale, and a bulky segment of Cheshire cheese.

His dinner concluded, Horatio quieted down for a ruminant spell, the acritudes of his mind being somewhat

assuaged by the repletions of his stomach.

He was going to start for home in the evening, and he bethought him he had several hours to spare. What should he do with himself? He had no inclination to return to 'that rascal Toby,' who, he felt, had swindled him in a large amount, but whose crafty convolutions he could by no means unravel. He stood in the doorway of the 'Yorkshire Stingo,' and looked abroad. The Minster's white towers were visible over the housetops. Beautiful, unchangeable, set grandly above all their environments, they were the same to him now as when he used to gaze at them in wonderment, as a little boy. A train of long-remitted memories came stealing into his thoughts, and the gentle mother of his childhood was their central figure. An unaccustomed tenderness stirred within him, as he gathered up, one by one, the broken links of his past.

He wandered out by well-remembered ways to the quiet Minster Close and sat down in view of its western front, casting his eyes around him. Yes, it was all the same, though many years had rolled away since last he had sat in that very spot and, as it seemed to him, upon that very seat. With feelings as like unto reverence as could be possible with such a nature as his, he regarded, long and steadfastly, the pale and perfect dignity of the Queen Cathedral, fancied himself dimly back again in the innocence of his childhood, and mused and brooded. With a heavy sigh, he glanced again upon his surroundings, looking for the old landmarks. They had planted some new trees, he thought, and the precincts showed augmented primness, otherwise, all remained the same, for even the buildings of the Close showed

scarcely any change.

To this place, he remembered then, his mother had ofttimes brought him, to sit in the quiet shades of the great cathedral, away from the cruelties of the cobbler and the wretchedness of their miserable home. She was of a pious mind, and had chosen to come here because the image of that holy fane had grown up within her as a tangible forecast of a better world. Sometimes she would sit mutely, hour after hour, the silence broken only by his scarcely heeded questionings; her fond, protective arm drawn round his nestling shoulders, till organ-toned 'old Peter' would strike the hour of noon, admonishing her to go back to the cobblery, and get the 'farthor's' dinner.

At other times, while resting here, she would fall to weeping quietly by herself, when his childish hand would steal wistfully into her lap, to seek the impress of her knitted

fingers.

Don't cry, mummar,' he would say to her, 'father's a naughty, bad man. Let's you and me run away from him and never go back any more.' Then she would bend down and kiss him and bid him be quiet, there was a good boy; and sensible, it might be, of some untimely footfall, would arise and take him away into the aisles of the great Minster, holding his hand. Together they would wander around amid the pillars and tombs, gazing up often at the glories of the western window, or spelling out the bygone English of the epitaphs, and soothed the while, peradventure, by the sacred strains of the organ and the singing of the choristers—that filled the distant sanctuary, herself too tearful or too hastily clad to take a seat with the worshippers.

On Sundays, though, in the afternoons, while freed for an hour from the drudgeries of the week, she would often repair with him to the cathedral service, and that recollection came to him now with a quaint and gentle tenderness, as seeming to have touched some hidden chord which nothing had

effected in all his life before.

He got up from the bench, strolled round the Minster, and finally entered it at its western door, seeking, with tentative, decorous footsteps, his mother's lingering-places of long ago, and as he moved about, hat in hand, between the pillars and along the aisles, the air he breathed seemed tempered with a sacerdotal balm and weighted with the subtleties of a reverend past.

Almost diffidently, he approached the choir. There was a redolence of vestments and ancient stone, of missal bindings and cushioned stalls. With exceptional docility, he dropped into a seat, and reminiscently gazed about him, suffering the sanctities of the place to permeate his thoughts. He looked up at the stately organ, and at the altar-screen—so beautiful; at the communion table within, at the solemn chancel walls above him—and beyond—at the glowing splendours of the far western window, that was casting upon all the sanctuary a sun-pencilled replica of its chromatic beauties. 'Yes,' thought he, 'these were all the very same.' How well he remembered them, and he almost felt like a little boy again, so closely had they aligned themselves with his early years.

Fragmental memories now busied themselves in his brain—of hymns they had sung and words they had spoken there, when as yet his infant heart had known but few emotions, and he was in the early bud of sensibility, albeit the more

elaborate praise had left no clear impressions.

The final words of the old prebendary, as he arose to dismiss his kneeling congregation, recurred to him again with startling freshness: 'May the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord; and may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, be amongst you and remain with you always.'

This time-honoured benediction used to impress his juvenile ears, although it had meant but little. Still, had it signified anything more to him in all his life since, the numberless times that he had listened to it? or had it any significance for him now? He shifted uneasily in his seat.

'Well no,' he concluded, drawing a full-bottomed sigh,

'he couldn't feel that it had.'

For long, long years our principal had been 'eaten up alive with his own conceits,' as his gentle spouse had often trenchantly told him, and truly they had been most rampant and various, with never the shimmer of a heavenly star to lead him above them. While holding, for convenience sake, to the established forms and beliefs, he had considered himself 'a touch above all that sort of a thing.' Unlike his mother, he had no pious proclivities, and when he came to

sound himself, as he did just now, he found that he had no religious convictions whatever, and settled it in his own mind that he never should have. Meanwhile, as he fidgeted in his seat, people were dropping in for the service and a verger was lighting the candles in the stalls, and placing out the psalters for the choristers; so, feeling that he was not in accord with these devotional preparations, he hastily arose and departed, much as he would have liked, in memory of his mother, to give ear once more to that old-time offering of prayer and praise.

Emerging from the Minster, he stolled out of the Close and walked about the ancient city, renewing dumb

acquaintance.

He stood for a while in the quaint old market-place, looking at the checkered brickwork in the fronts of the houses. Then he prowled away to the castle precincts and gazed at the Conqueror's tower. Tired at length with these recollective researches, he wandered out to the banks of the quiet Ouse that stretched away, under cloud and sunshine, through illimitable meads and pastures, where herds of drowsy cattle fed, and the blue undulations of the distant wolds were lost in the murk of the horizon.

He sat him down on the river bank and thought again of his mother. He called to mind a misty morning, long before, when they had fled together, sudden and disconsolate, from the savage corrections of the 'farthor,' and he had besought her to take him into the country. Tenderly complacent, she had led him out of the city by winding footpaths, and through bosky lanes, gold-carpeted with October leaves, into the Vale of York; and there they had sought these same long stretches of the sleepy river, and had followed them afar into the sunflecked valley yonder.

He lay back and closed his eyes, and a picture like this flitted before him, out of the haze of his manifold years; for he had looked upon the reality half a century before. The limpid, placid river with the cattle grouped along its sedgy banks; their wet muzzles glistening through the steam of their nostrils; their images reflected in the scarcely moving water. The air is crisp with a lightsome touch of winter, and sweet-scented with the wood-fires they have started in the cottages by the roadside. 'Tis the last of the autumn and early morning; and the sun is rising above the

distant uplands, bronzing the pastures, far and near, behind the malting-house that stands up dark in front, with its russet roof and sloated cowl. The night fogs are hanging over the meadows for miles and miles; and creeping up and down the dark hillsides to linger until the sunshine

shall melt them away.

A merry little ploughboy comes whistling along, his dinner, tied up in a blue pocket handkerchief, dangling in his hand. Yonder, the plough in the turnip-field, left in its furrow over night, upcasts a glint of metal from the sombre soil, which is webbed in countless kris-crosses with the dew-decked filaments of the field-spider. The plough-horses near by, so clean and fresh, stand and nose each other playfully, as they wait for the ploughman, who is tinkering with the whiffletree, close at their feet, and they roll their eyes round at him as he hales them off to their work with a cheery cry and a sounding smack on their haunches. Then the rough harness bumps and jingles, and they trample lustily away. A slender figure with a careworn face, stoops and kisses him when he says he'll be a ploughboy, and live in the country. 'And would you leave your mother, Freddy, for good and all?' asks the patient woman beside him. 'No, mummar,' he replies, 'that I wouldn't; you should come and live in the country too, out of father's way, for he's a bad man.' Then, sadly his mother kisses him again, and they take their way back into York.

The picture was finished and it faded away.

Mr Fledger got upon his feet, and contemplated the companion scenery around him. 'Forty-five years ago,' he at length exclaimed; 'yes; forty-five years ago and I scarcely see any difference. Ah! would to God I hadn't changed any more than these old streams and pastures.' Then, fetching a heavy inspiration, he turned upon his heel and moodily made for town.

It was a long way back, for he had wandered far. Tired out and dispirited, he reached at last the city ramparts, just as the day was done, and sank down upon a coping-stone, where, between the meagre branches of the autumn trees, he could look abroad for a last time, over the sleeping bosom of the peaceful valley, behind whose limits, deep-swathed lready in the darkling vapours of night, the veiled and rimson sun had dipped. He rested his chin in his hands,

adverting again to his boyish days—a perstringence that was all the keener, now that he felt the evening of his life to be drawing on apace.

The time came back to him when he had joined his playmates on Christmas Eve, to sing carols in the streets, in front of ruddy blinds and fire-lit windows, and peeped at by the jocund juveniles within. How they had followed this up on 'Boxing day' with a call for largess at every house, and the tunes and the doggerel crept into his ears—

'We knock with yer knocker, and we ring with yer bell, To ask for a "copper" for singing so well.'

Then he recalled the modest delicacies they purchased afterwards with the funds collected—jumbles, Everton toffee and Banbury cakes—and how they had hurried off, purple-fingered and snivel-nosed, to the shelter of the old walls to devour the same, away from the cutting wind and the whirling snow. What a merry little company they had been, in spite of all the drawbacks, and he told himself he could willingly return to those humble, shifty, rowdy times.

He dwelt upon his fretful strivings in all the years gone by, whilom contending, he scarcely knew for what; of his repeated dismal failures, and of his cruel farings with that heartless woman, who must be called his wife, and he sickened of everything to his very soul. No one in the world had ever cared for him but his mother, he ponderedignoring the affection of his crippled Conny, and his spirit writhed in its wayward loneliness, his head bowed down to his knees, and his weary eyes sought the cold and foot-worn flagstones beneath him. His mind now wandered off to his father's funeral and to an image of that ill-favoured derelict he had that morning seen them lay in the grave. In unavoidable disgust his thoughts went back to his early daysto scenes and circumstances contrasting; to the death of his sister, his mother's great grief, and his father's callousheartedness. He remembered how afterwards, her whole nature burdened with despair, she had stedfastly repelled his amatory advances, when he had tortured her with a week of persecution that had been inconceivably brutal, and how, after brooding savagely all day upon his rebuffs, he had called her by a shameful name the very evening before she left him.

Then he dwelt upon their surreptitious flight (his mother and he) while old Filcher was pounding in his shop, and the subsequent incidents of their journey to Kendon. stuffy stage-coach, that had jolted him all day, although he sat upon his mother's knees; her fainting spell as they were clattering into the courtyard of the 'White Horse Inn' at Peterborough, where other coaches were standing; the commotion among the passengers and their kind solicitudes; how she wouldn't suffer them to carry her into the 'White Horse,' nor lift her out of the coach for fear 'her business would be in everybody's mouth'; and their furtive little meal afterwards, all to themselves, out of her modest basket, in that same coach, when she was somewhat recovered, the hostlers, meanwhile, changing the horses, and the passengers enjoying a thumping good dinner in the 'bar parlour,' as their coachman had expressed it. Then the continuance of their ride through a rolling country, heavy with the golden harvest, and dotted with towns and homesteads, until they alighted at the 'Reapers' Inn,' on the 'King's Highway,' at Kendon-whence they took an uphill climb to their journey's end at the cooper's home; and he remembered their arrival in the dusk of evening—the kindly faces and pleasant greetings of the uncle and his family, and the quaint old gabled house, so staunch and cosy, whose doors stood open to all comers; and ah! that gladsome time which followed, the happiest of all his life, so soon to be done with, so impossible to be repeated.

His new-found companions, too, jolly and good-natured, all; their jaunts together in search of nuts and blackberries, across the stubble fields, in and out the leafy lanes, or deep down along the pebbled watercourses, whose lofty banks were embowered in green bushes, and canopied with giant trees.

Sometimes they would go a-fishing in the still waters behind the mill, where velvety, brown bulrushes fringed the emerald banks, and water-lilies, in little groups, floated flat on the quiet pools under the weeping willows; and the crawfish lurked among those stepping-stones which led across the stream.

He called to mind those patronising rides in the countrycart with the farm bailiff to far-off sleepy towns which nestled in the folds of the hills under skies of deep cerulean. And those visits of good behaviour—to gentlemen's servants in gentlemen's parks, when he was cautioned to be prim, and was made exceptionally trim, for his contact with backstairs respectability. His genial reception in the culinary quarters of the great mansion, with, peradventure, a tip-toe peep in at the library or the picture gallery, and a taste of the delicacies which were preparing in the kitchen, with a demure walk afterwards, under the gardener's care, around the flower-beds, and through the hothouses, and a final solo scamper before going home, out amongst the ferns and fallow deer in the 'home park,' or up and down the grand old avenue that crossed the ancient lordship.

How he had clambered on top of the heaped-up sheaves in the great waggon, as it wended its way out of the corn-field to the big black barn, and the glorious fun they had all had at the 'harvest home'; and later, when the autumn was drawing to a close, and the evenings were getting long and chilly, what jolly games they played at in the cooper's kitchen—'forfeits,' 'blind man's buff,' 'hunt the slipper,' and what not. And what tales they told around the log-wood fire, whose blazes set the copper kitchen ware a-gleaming on the walls, or grouped hilarious in the chimney corner to play scratch-cradle or dominoes, with a dozen hams in canvas hanging in the chimney's throat—smoking for Christmas.

Ah, yes! he remembered all these delectable things, and many more, which had belonged to that rural home, until Michaelmastide was over and the fruitful year was done; and then, along with the frosts and rains, came his mother's mortal illness.

He called to mind her strivings against the cruel foe, helped as she had been by sympathetic hearts and willing hands, and her death and burial, amidst the tears and simple sorrow of the cooper and his family; and he wondered, ah! he did wonder, when his time should come to pay the inexorable debt of Nature, whether there would be a single loving soul at his bedside to soothe his dying agonies or drop a parting tear upon his new-made grave.

He seriously doubted it, that he did.

Wherefore our Frederick, in painful memory of his past, and in mournful concern for his future, buried his head between his knees, and incontinently yielded to his misery. Alas! poor Fledge.

But now the sonorous strokes of the cathedral bell broke upon his ear, deliberately counting five. He started, straightened, and looked about him. It was growing dark, and he must bestir himself if he would depart for Waltonbury that evening. So he jumped to his feet, wiped his dewy eyes with his ready coat sleeve, and hurried back to Turpin Alley.

Yes, back to his brother Toby and some lukewarm tea, supplemented with a few hunks of the toughest of stale toast, which he had the alternative of making eatable by soaking in his cup, or doubtfully palatable by a spare lubrication with some rancid mutton dripping; and his brother sat opposite to him during his repast, and incessantly mouthed him against losing that south-bound train.

Now this was a pleasant valedictory, surely?

Although I beg you not to be too hard upon Toby, seeing how the ingrain good fellowship of that fraternal creature had made it impossible for him to permit the departure of his 'dear brother' upon a long night journey—without 'getting him something to eat and drink.' Now there was no coal in the house, nor any wood, so he had contrived to start up a little fire with an old newspaper and some 'heel-ball,' which he had raked up in the shop, keeping it going with a timely addition of the 'farthor's' old boots. Over this fitful and fuliginous blaze, he had parboiled some tea in the lidless coffee-pot, and coddled up the crusts of the day before; and though the tea was smoky and the toast was leathery, still our Toby had done his best, so let us thank him for his brother. Yes, that we will, warmhearted, generous Toby Filcher, such 'a chip of the old block,' such 'a credit to your farthor.' . . .

Well, our Frederick having coquetted with this dainty meal, and exploded with a few choice epithets, of which it was provocative, stuffed his belongings into his carpet-bag and bluntly demanded his share of the 'farthor's' money. So Toby fetched the sock, counted out the cash, and glumly divided it, under strict fraternal scrutiny, into two equal heaps; then, with a kind of hesitancy, he pulled out of his pocket a singular document and laid it on the table. This was the tenor of it: that Frederick Filcher, youngest son of the late Tobias Filcher, shoemaker of York, having herewith received his just and equal share of all the money

his father had left, now held no further claim against his brother, Tobias Filcher, shoemaker, of Middlesborough, who had found the money and taken care of it.

'I want yer, Fred,' said he, 'to put yer name to that bit o' paper. Here's the pen and ink, and it won't take yer but a moment; it'll be a satisfaction to both of us, and considerin' the way you've acted since you've been here,

I think it's no more than you oughter do.'

'H'm, do you now, Toby? But I won't sign that,' was the ungenerous reply. 'No, no, I've knocked about in the world too long, Toby, to be kidnapped in my old age by a thing of that sort. This isn't all the money father left; you've hidden the other sock full—somewhere, you knave, though I can't prove it. I'm obliged to go back to my own plaguey affairs, but if I ever do find you out in your thievery, I'll be on to you—dead nuts. I'll have the law of you, Toby, so sure as you stand in those ugly boots. There's this old crib to sell, and the few sticks of furniture; I know you'll do the best you can with it, for your own sake, and mind you send me my share of the proceeds, for I'll find out what that ought to be from the man that buys the property. We'll talk of signing papers, Toby, when I get all that belongs to me, but not before,' and he scrambled his money into the carpet-bag. 'Now then! get out of my way,' exclaimed our hero, 'and be damned to you; I must be off,' and elbowing his brother roughly to one side, he threw open the shop door and sallied forth, to the delight of several of the neighbours, who had been listening outside, in view of his imminent departure. Clear of Turpin Alley, Mr Fledger hurried down to the railway station, where he had only a few moments to wait for the London He jumped into an empty third-class compartment and slammed up the window to keep out the night air. 'And now for home, sweet home,' he sneered, as he flung himself into a corner, and foreprized to himself the miseries which awaited him there. He glared at the blinking lamp, that was joggling up and down in its hole in the roof, and gave vent to his feelings in loud soliloquies, most bitterly passionate and horribly profane.

An hour or two later you might have seen 'brother Toby' get into the last train for Middlesborough, and he, too, had the luck of a seclusive journey, and he hugged himself

dearly as he speeded home to wife and family. Can you fancy the greetings with which Mrs Toby welcomed him back to her affectionate bosom, and her Toby's responses thereto. Here they are in the concrete.

'Well, Toby, so you're back again all right,' says the faithful partner of his joys and sorrows, as she lets him in

by the side door, at half-past twelve that night.

'Yerse, here I am, yer see.'

'How did yer get on?'

- 'Pretty fair, Belinda. We gave the old man a nice, respectable funeral.'
 - 'H'm! Did yer find any money?'
 - 'Oh, yerse, I believe yer, my gal.'

'How much?'

'Well, I'll tell yer when we get upstairs.'

So they go upstairs, Toby in his stocking feet, so as not to waken the snoozing children, who, being grown-up, are 'mighty cunning and inquisitive.'

'How about that brother of yours?' resumes his wife, as

they commence to disrobe. 'Did he come?'

- 'Oh, ah, he came, right enough; acted like a beast, too, all the time.'
 - 'How was that?'
- 'Why, the fact is, he wanted more'n was good for him' (winking hard at his spouse). 'Not that he got it; quite the contrairy, for I wasn't a-goin' to let that coxcomb get the better o' me, trust yer Toby for that, Belinda.' Then he pulls the money out of his pocket, first one sock, and then the other, and dumps it down on the chest of drawers. 'Now there's one hundred and eighty-five pound five, my rightful share of what farthor left' (winking again at Mrs Toby).

'Yes, and what's the other?'

'Ah! that's somethin' yer can't dig up every day, I tell yer,' and he pats the other bulging old sock affectionately. 'Still I dug it up out o' the garden, as soon as Fred was gone this afternoon. Curious, wasn't it? Though to tell yer the truth, Belinda, and don't you let it go any further for the world, mind,' holding up a warning finger close to Mrs Toby's nose, 'there's nothing so curious about it after all, for I buried it there myself the day farthor died. Found it in the mattress under his bed. I thought, belikes, I

should find somethin' there. So I rooted about till I got hold of it, and I didn't let go neether, though the poor ole fellow felt very heavy, for I had to raise im up to pull it out, and he was as stiff as a poker.' . . .

'Ha! ha! I can't help a-larsin', Belinda, when I think o' that long-nosed brother o' mine; yer never say such a pelican as he's got to be in all yer life, a-walkin' up and down, up and down in the yard, frettin' and swearin' and swinging his arms, becoz he felt sure that money was about somewheres and he couldn't find it. He'd searched the house from top to bottom, and me a-helpin' him, of course, like a brother should. Ha! ha! But no, he couldn't find that money for the life and blood of 'im. Best of it was, it layed right under his nose while he was a-walkin' about, planted under an old flower-pot, and I stood at the kitchen winder and watched him for fear o' things, till he got dead sick of it, and took himself off for the rest o' the day. 'Well, my dear, there's the cabbage,' patting the old sock again. 'Just six hundred and fifty pounds to the good. What d'yer think o' that, Belinda?'

'My powers! you're an artful old boy,' is the chucklesome reply. 'You've got a good headpiece on your old

shoulders, that's for certain, Toby.'

'Well, my dear, p'r'aps I have; I've always reckoned I had. Now let's put the money under the bolster and get

inter bed, for I'm tired, I tell yer.'

So they put the money under the bolster and got into bed, and tucked themselves up nice and comfortable, and kissed each other good-night, forsooth, with much unusual show of affection. Pretty chickens. And oh! the golden dreams, all night long, that blessed their innocent slumbers.

CHAPTER XIX

THE PAINS OF DISSOLUTION

MR FLEDGER, cramped and chilled, alighted from the train at Waltonbury. He was a lone arrival, for it was not yet six o'clock.

The dawn was grey and cold. In harmony therewith was the salutation of Mr Topton, as that gentleman, in very matutinal attire, poked his surprised and sleepy head out of the doorway of his office, upon hearing our Frederick scurry across the waiting-room.

The High Street was not yet astir. The early milkman in snow-white smock, a burnished pail in his hands, was going his rounds to fill the proffered milk-jug and exchange jocosities with bare-armed, roguish Bridgets, who were sweeping the front door-steps. Occasionally, some inquisitive face would peep out from the dimities of the bedroom windows, or a casement would be hooked back by some early burgess who had just completed his toilet, but beyond these tokens of awakening life there was nothing to suggest the quiet bustle of the coming morning. Right ahead, however, above those whitewashed gables, on the crest of the hill, and more patent to Fledger than anything else, was that flaunting sign-board of his, and those proud and giant words of his own superscription—and they stood forth, a phylactery of red, white and blue, in the midst of the modest dawn. You'll remember the manifesto.

'WALTONBURY HOUSE ACADEMY

Principal—FREDERICK HORATIO FLEDGER, Ph.D., F.S.A. Member of the College of Preceptors and Professor of Caligraphy from Burton College, Mancaster.'

Yes, that was the brave lettering which stared him in the face, and mocked him to the marrow, as he toiled up High Street Hill.

He reached the entrance to his scholical abode, and stood for a moment in the gateway. The iron gates were swung wide open aud roped back; while new-made ruts of heavy cart-wheels, going in between, went ruthlessly across the ill-kept lawn, and over the shabby flower-beds. Some broken crockery lay in a jumble outside the door. He glanced up at his wife's bedroom, and saw that the curtains were gone, and the casements swinging open.

'What did it mean?' he asked himself. A quivering lump came in his throat. He hastened across the garden, threw open the unbolted door, and strode into the hall. The oilcioth was gone! The stair-carpets were gone! Nay, the open and empty parlour showed him that the blood-red

carpet which had graced that elegant apartment was also gone! Yea! even those antlers which had so long and honourably ornamented the wall—were minus! while his gown and mortar-board, tossed off their accustomed hanging-place, lay in a down-trodden heap right before his eyes, in the passage-way!

He advanced to the foot of the staircase in a cold sweat, and almost instinctively bellowed for Conny. There came

a quick response from the region of the kitchen.

'Lawks! master, be that you?' squalled out the buttons in that piping banter so peculiarly his own, as he came stumbling along the back passage in his not too elegant nightgear. 'Well, sir, I sed you'd come back, though they mostly thought you wouldn't. It's a empty 'ouse, sir, now, for yer missus has run away and taken the children with her and most 'o the furniture. I'm very sorry for yer, sir, that I am. And Miss Angy and Mr Sheepshead are gone too, sir; they took 'emselves off on the quiet like you did, sir, early in the mornin'. I caught 'em whisperin' on the landin' the day you left. Mr Sheepshead was togged up, and though Miss Angy warn't dressed for out o' doors, she'd got her best frock on. So when I heerd him go outen the front door, about twelve, I says to myself, "Bobby, you may as well step down to the station and watch their little games," so I did; and hid myself in the station-yard, where I could see the platform and nobody could see me. Soon arter, Mr Sheepshead comes onter the platform, and walks up and down, gazin' at 'is feet and bitin' 'is nails, and just as I heerd the train a-comin' Miss Angy sud'nly appears, lookin' dreadful hot. Then the porters brought out several big boxes and a carpet bag, and shoved 'em inter the luggage van. Then her and Mr Sheepshead steps inter the train together and off they goes. "A dun thing," says I to myself, walkin' up to the station-master, who was standin' lookin' after 'em. "That was my missus's sister, sir, and one o' them teachers, and she's run off with 'im, safe as a gun," says I to Mr Topton. "Where be they a-goin', sir?" "Booked for London," says he; "that's where all the shady people goes to, my boy." And then the other folks down at the station comes round to find out the particklars, the same as they did the mornin' when you ran away, sir; and when I'd told 'em all I know'd about it—why, I comes back to the 'ouse.' 'Well, you young whelp, don't stand there grinning at me, damn you; what next?' ejaculated Frederick, as Bobby

paused and smirked up in his master's face.

'In course I will, sir. Well you never seed in all your life such a shine as the missus kicked up, when she found her sister had eloped with that there Sheepshead, for I went upstairs and told her about it as soon as I got 'ome, and gave 'er a letter besides, as I saw lying on the mantelshelf in Miss Angy's room, and when she'd read it, I made sure she'd go raving mad. Why, just becoz she caught me larfin' at her arterwards down in the kitchen, she ups with the salt-box and shies it at my 'ed fit to knock it off, and a-roarin' at me all the time that bad, I dassent answer her for my life, but run and locked myself in the larder for the rest 'o the day, an' nary a bit o' dinner did I get 'ceptin' what I could reach down off the shelves. Two or three times she'd come with such a rush at the door that I thought surely she'd bust it in, so that the wittals I was eatin' didn't do me no good, sir, for the worriment of 'er. Well, she guv it up about dark, but I heerd her lettin' on all round, sky-high, at the children and everybody, till she goes up to bed. Then I creeps out and goes to bed myself. Next mornin', I keeps well outen 'er way, yer know, down in the coal cellar; but I could 'ear she was startin' somethin' fresh, there was such a running up and down stairs, and lumberin' things about. Presently there comes a smashin' o' the crockery ware. One o' them gals 'ad done it, an while the missus was a-larrupin' into 'er, and the gal a-screamin', I thought I'd peep out and see what was a-goin' on-and 'ere they was in the hall, sir, a-packin' up the furniture, Susan and Mary-Jane was arollin' up the carpets, and old Budd was in the parlour, pullin' down the winder curtains and a-swearin' to 'isself like a tomcat. Bimeby, the missus puts on 'er bonnet and goes out. Back she comes though, soon arterwards, on John Perry's waggon, ridin' in front, along with Perry and Davy Boost, and a-naggin' 'er hardest, "Now look sharp, you fellers," says she, as she jumps down, "an' I'll be clear o this glory 'ole in no time." So Perry and Boost they jumps down too, and ties the gates back, and drives straight acrost the garden, they does, and up to the front door, the missus a-follerin' with her face tied up. Then they all begins a-loadin' up the furniture, belikes for a journey, so

as they wasn't a-thinkin' about me, I went inter the kitchen, an' I says to Molly, "what's to do now, Mrs Buttox?"
"Why, Bob,' says she, "the missus is a-goin' away, goin' for good, too. It's awful suddent on the master, if so be as he should come back. She's given us all warnin' ter leave this very arternoon, and she's paid us what's owin' us, so we'll 'ave to go. But I shall come back, Bobby, when I know she's outer the way, an' take care o' the 'ouse against the return o' yer master; for he may come 'ome agen, though I summat doubt it, an' I pity 'im, Bob, from the bottom 'o my 'art,—and old Budd's goin' to do likewise, but you've got to go along 'o the rest." "Not me," says I, "I'll hide where she can't find me, and when you an' old Budd comes back, I'll open the door for yer."

'So when she'd given me somethin' to eat, I went and hid myself in the cellar, inside an old barr'l, an' curls myself up an' eats my grub, and listens to the confusion upstairs. I heerd the missus callin' out for me, as I thought, all over the 'ouse, an' once she came down to look for me, but nary a move did I make till I heerd 'em tramp off, servant gals an' all, and slam the door. Then I goes upstairs and there warn't a soul in the place—as I could tell, only the dog a-howlin' in the backyard. So I went into the larder for some more wittals, an just as I was a-settin' down to some bread and jam, I hears a step on the stairs, and the next minit—Miss Conny comes creepin' in, as black as a tinker.

"Lawks! miss," says I, "how you frightened me; why haven't you gone with yer mar?" "I never meant to go with mother, Bob," she says; "I'd rather die first. I've been 'idin' up in the cock-loft. Didn't you hear mother acallin' for me." "No," says I, "I thought she was a-callin' for me." "Well, give me some o' that," she says, "afore you eat it all up, for I'm awful hungry"; so she set down. and we finished it atween us. Molly an' old Budd came back in the evenin', an' we've been livin' comfortable together, these three days, a-waitin' for you to come 'ome agen. There's none of 'em up yet, sir, but I'll go and call 'em.'

So away ran Bobby in his ragged nightshirt to arouse the cook and the gardener, and to call out at the bottom of the back stairs, 'Conny! Miss Conny! get up, why don't yer; here's yer par come back.' Then he hurried off to his own little hole, and dressed himself. . . .

Mr Fledger retreated to his laboratory. If he had intended throwing himself into his arm-chair, he was grievously disappointed, for the arm-chair had vanished, and he found himself deprived alike of his last shreds of dignity and all possibility of self-consolation. A passionate cry escaped his lips, as, sensible of his loss, he glared around him. His dirty blankets lay in a heap in the corner, where he had left them, although the mattress had been rudely abstracted.

So he tumbled himself down upon them, for he was very tired, and jamming his spine into the angle of the wall, and drawing up his knees as a prop for his chin, he closed his eyes, groaned his resignations, and lapsed into silence.

Now did he dwell, as he ought to have done, upon his wife's tenderness, which had thus so evidently prompted her to vouchsafe him this last resort of lowly comfort? It was true she had deemed it incumbent upon her, for the schooling of her schoolmaster, up to the last, to take away his arm-chair,—to signify, I doubt not, that henceforth it would behove him to stand up like a man, and face his altered fortunes. Yet, nevertheless, when she had done this, her woman's heart would not let her deprive him of that wherewithal for seasonable slumber, which should naturally accrue to him, in common with the house-dog, who was curled up asleep on a final old sack.

Now I beg to ask you—is it not a beautiful thing to render to every soul its just apportionment of praise, however blamable it may otherwise be? especially, as we are thus enabled to gather that otherwise unseemly, objectionable, violent Mrs Fledger into the common fold of our dear humanity.

To be sure it is, for though it must be conceded, as a matter of fact, that she had carried off everything in the house she could either sell or put to any use, not excepting the globes in the parlour, yet she had left her master 'his own dirty clouts to lie down upon,' and I hasten to inscribe this act of clemency upon the spotless page of her credits. . . .

But our Frederick's reveries, whatever they may have been, were cut very short by the entrance of Miss Conny, her hair en déshabillé, and her clothing decidedly the worse for a prolonged acquaintance with cobwebs and rafters. Meagre-

faced, and anxious looking was she, though breaking into joyous demonstrations at the sight of her father, throwing herself upon him and kissing him, then nestling down in the blankets beside him, to unburden herself of the news.

She told him the same tale, though in many more words, that Buttons had told, supplementing it with a graphic account of her own experiences and hardships while the daddy had been away.

'I knew, father,' said she, 'I should come in for it when you were gone, and I did too, that very morning, for mother ran up into my room, while I was crying on the bed, and she looked dreadful, with her big, red face bound up, all one side, and she said to me, "Where's your old villain of a father gone to, pray? Has he deserted his lawful wife and family? Tell me this minute, you young minx; you two have been laying your ugly heads together all along, to see what mischief you could breed in the house, you know you have. me at once now." And because I wouldn't tell her anything, she pulled me off the bed and boxed my ears right and left. Then she wanted to know whether you meant to come back, and because I wouldn't tell her that either, she pulled me round the room by the hair of my head, and when she found it was all no use, she swore she'd keep me there, night and day, without a morsel of food, until I told her everything. "You ugly little wretch," she said, "you're the living spit of your beautiful father; why didn't he cart you off along with him, I want to know? Well, now he's gone, you shall knuckle down, my lady, or else I'll starve you to it." Then she flung herself off and locked the door.

'I had another good cry after that, but I began to think whether I couldn't get out of the room; so I opened the window and found that if I could only climb over the roof, I could reach that big chimney in the middle, walk round it, and get in at one of the dormitory windows, then perhaps

I might find a place to hide myself.

'So I got out on the roof and held to the window-ledge; but when I tried to take a step, my foot slipped, so I took off my shoes, to see if I could walk on the tiles in my stockings, and sure enough I could. So I shut the window after me, so as mother shouldn't know how I'd escaped, and climbed up to the chimney, crawled round it, and slid down the roof to the window on the other side, and got in there just

as I expected. There wasn't anybody in the dormitory; so I poked about in all the corners for a hiding-place, but could find none. Then I considered a bit. That partition Mr Gripsaw put up looked rather shikery, so I pulled some of the beds away from it, and looked behind; and just at the back of that rocking-bed, you know, father, I found a hole close to the floor, and I could see in there, under the roof; then I squeezed through and pulled the bed back in its place; so after that I felt more secure.

'It's a dreadfully dirty place in there, father, and there isn't room to stand up, so I squatted down. I didn't care about the dirt so long as I could hide away from mother till you came home. There was a little hole in the tiles where I could see the sky, but it didn't let in much light; so I pulled and pushed at it, till I loosened a tile, and twisted it round; then I could see where I was, and get some fresh air.

'Presently I could hear mother and the rest of 'em calling for me all over the house; and once they ran up in the dormitory, but I kept as still as a mouse, though when evening came I felt very hungry, and wondered how I should get anything to eat. After it got dark, I listened to the chimes at the Abbey, and I heard it strike eight, nine and ten, and the house was that quiet I couldn't hear a sound. I was very cold and hungry, and I thought it would be safe to go down into the kitchen for something to eat. So I pushed the old bedstead back and got out, and felt my way downstairs, though I was trembling with fright all the time, in case I should see a ghost or something.

'When I came to the kitchen, I lit a candle and got some bread and ham out of the larder—and sat down and ate it, without making the least noise, for fear I should wake up that Bobby. I found a bottle of ginger wine in the cook's cupboard, and when I'd drunk some of that I felt better. So I crept up to my room and pulled the clothes off my bed, and took them up in the dormitory, and pushed 'em in at the hole, and got in and rolled myself up in 'em, blew out the light, and tried to go to sleep. But I heard such strange noises, they kept me awake. I was worrying too, lest mother should find me up there in the morning; but when it got light I dozed off, and must have slept a long time, too, for when I woke up, I could tell it was quite late; the sun was striking through the roof and the whole place seemed

to be in an uproar. I could hear the men moving the furniture, and the servants racing about, and mother ranting after 'em and the doors slamming, and all sorts, and I was just going to creep out of my hole to find out what it meant, when I heard 'em coming up into the dormitory again. Then they began to lug the things about there,—mother and the men, and I heard her say, "Well, Perry, there isn't much up here worth anything, but you can take down that boatbedstead; I might sell it." I didn't wait to hear any more. but I snatched up the bedclothes and scrambled over the rafters, out of the way. Well, the next minute, they'd caught up the bedstead and were carrying it away, when I heard mother exclaim, "Why, look at that hole, Perry! do you think that gal could have hidden away in there? Have a look." And I watched Mr Perry poke his head in and look all round, but he couldn't see me, for I'd got behind the chimney.

"There's no signs of 'er, marm," says he, "an' I don't suppose she'd know there's such a place in the 'ouse; besides, she'd 'a come out before this to get some grub. No, marm, it's very mysterious, in course, but I rayly b'leeve as I telled yer downstairs, that yer didn't properly lock that door; consequintly, the gal got out arterwards, and run off somewheres; maybe to one 'o the neighbours and they're a-nurtin' 'er up on the quiet, or maybe, though I hardly like to say it to you, marm, as is 'er mother, maybe she's gone and drownded 'erself. You never knows what a gal o' that

age'll take it in 'er 'ed to do."

"Oh, she's not drowned herself," says mother. "If she's got out of the house at all, she's made straight for her beautiful father, and he must take care of her; I've done my duty by her if ever a mother did; and I can't be hanging round here for her ladyship to come back. Get along downstairs with that bed, Perry."

'So they all bundled off, and I came out of the hole and went to the window, where I could see the road and the front garden, and I watched there for hours and hours,

though I was shivering with fright and excitement.

'In the afternoon I saw the servants go down the street with their things tied up in bundles, and Mr Perry's waggon drive away, loaded up high with the furniture. Then I-saw mother and the children get into a fly and follow the waggon out on the London Road, until I lost sight of 'em under the trees.

'Well, after that, I laid down on one of the beds and cried for a long time, for it was dreadful to think that I should never see mother or the children any more, and I wondered what I should do, father, if you didn't come back pretty soon. But while I was thinking it over, I heard somebody walking about in the empty rooms. So I went down in the kitchen, and there was Bobby sitting at the table, stuffing bread and jam, like the little pig that he is, and he turned round to me and said—'

'Well, well, Conny,' broke in Mr Fledger, glutted with his daughter's lengthy recital, 'never mind what that young scoundrel said, I've had enough of his talk to last me all my life. It's a shameful, wicked piece of business, that's what it is. Your mother's left me high and dry, and I'm stranded and ruined. If I hadn't taken my own little bit of money along with me, she'd 'a had that too.' He paused in silent bitterness, then went on again. 'What's Mollie and Budd hanging about the house for now, and that demon of a boy, too? Do they dream I'm going to found an asylum for 'em?' and he started up from his blankets and went into the kitchen, his daughter following him.

Poor Mollie had already lit the fire and was busy getting the breakfast; Grafton Budd helping her in a fidgety way; while Bobby was bustling about the scullery, making a furious

racket with the pots and pans.

'Oh, good-morning to you, sir,' cheerily exclaimed Mrs Buttox, upon the approach of her master. 'I do be glad to see you back agen in yer own 'ome, that I do, and though it ain't for the likes o' me to be a-speakin' so plain to yer at a time like this, yet I will say I'm oncommon sorry for yer, sir, 'deed I am. The missus, yer see, she packed me off along o' the rest of 'em. But I'm a lone woman hereabouts, and after I'd been down to the railway, I thought I might just as well come back agen, when everybody was gone, and mind the 'ouse for yer.'

'It's jest that way wi'me, sir,' chimed in the old gardener, doffing his ancient and habitual straw hat, and twisting it round nervously. 'If so be as I could help yer, sir, to straighten things up agen, yer needn't trubble about the

wage for many a day to come, sir.'

'Same thing with me, sir, exackly,' added the buttons, coming to the kitchen door with a dirty saucepan in his dirty hands. 'I allers liked you better nor the rest of 'em, though you has your little ways, sir, like I has myself, an' I'll be glad to 'elp yer keep things a-goin' all I can, and nary a word about the pay for't, till you're regular set up on yer feet agen. More'n that I dassent say, sir, but 'eres our best wishes to yer, and we're ready and willin' to do yer biddin'.'

'H'm,' responds the Fledger with a cynical grin, while his long nose tries its hardest to get into his mouth, 'very kind and considerate of you all, I'm sure, quite refreshing too, on account of its novelty. But I may as well tell you all, out of hand, that I can do nothing further for you; so if you're depending on me, you're leaning on a rotten reed. I'm going to sell everything off and clear out of this damned place as quick as I can. Besides, I don't remember that any of you were particularly "ready and willing" in my palmy days, and now my back's broke, I can't see why you

should pretend to be.'

'Now don't you never talk like that about me, sir,' retorted the cook, getting hot in the face. 'I dun a good many little things for you, sir, one time and another, since I bin 'ere, which you seems to forget; and I'm ready to do 'em agen—everything I can. And I'm not a pauper, sir, jest you remember that. I've saved the most o' my wages for many a long year, and when I goes away, I can keep myself without anybody's 'elp, thank God, till I gets another place. I tell yer once more, I came back 'ere to keep 'ouse for yer and 'elp yer in yer trubble all's I can, and for no other purpose whatsomever. As for them two, they can speak for theirselves,' and she wiped her rosy face with the corner of her apron, looked straight at her master, and spoke up again without giving him time to reply,—

'Now, where will you take your breakfast, sir? You'll find the dinin'-room sort of empty, so I'll set it out for yer 'ere in the kitchen; its warm and comfortable and you needn't mind us a we'll set our breakfastic offen the dresser'

mind us; we'll eat our breakfastis offen the dresser.'

So she proceeded to lay out her victuals on the kitchentable, while the gardener, silent and obsequious, drew up Mrs Buttox's own elbow-chair in readiness for Mr Fledger, and supplemented the seat of another chair with the cook's old hassock out of the chimney corner, as a special con-

venience for Miss stumpy-legged Conny. There was hot buttered toast, and steaming coffee, new-laid eggs and slices of ham, home-made bread and fresh butter, a cold leg of mutton, and some raisin cookies. A regular 'stick to your ribs' breakfast, and our down-hearted and subordinate principal, with his little girl,—wondering to themselves how long they would be fortunate enough to secure such cates, sat down, free of all ceremony, and did ample justice to them; and their hard-strung gills and purple noses warmed up to a lenitive pinkness as, with clatter of knives and forks, they shovelled in the good old stand-bys, kept in famous countenance, all the while, by Mollie and Budd and the buttons, who, ranged along the dresser with their knees askew, took in, with slobbery gusto, their corresponding load, reinforced (let me whisper you) in worthy Mrs Buttox's case, with a surreptitious nippet of gin, behind the shelter of her open cupboard door, 'just,' as she always expressed it, 'for to settle 'er stummuck.'

These recuperations effected, our Frederick went upstairs on a marching and methodical survey of his ransacked premises; beginning with the dormitory, and coming down, room by room, into the parlour; giving emphasis to his painful inspection, with many a lively explosion of his restive profanity; Miss Conny trotting behind him, and helping him out with frequent ill-timed and dolorous reminders,

'Why!' he passionately exclaimed, 'she hasn't left me a single, damned bed in the place fit for a Christian to lie down upon. No, nor a decent chair, nor a table; not one, and, by Jove!' he ejaculated, or something worse, as he stalked into the empty parlour, 'the blanketty blank has even walked off with my globes as well, that I gave ten pounds for, not six months ago,—the thieving, hard-hearted, blank, blank hussy.'

'Yes, father, and she's taken your big picture of Waltonbury Abbey,' added Conny, pointing up to the empty space where lately had hung—that surprisingly meritorious work of art.

'Yes, yes, I see, I see. I've a devilish good mind to hunt the blanketty blank up, and try and get some of the things back; but then,' he groaned, after a pause, as he wiped the cold sweat from his corrugated brow, 'there'll be

the very devil to pay over it.' And I may confide to you, my reader, that there probably would, seeing that his better-half had purchased, 'with her own money,' everything of value which had adorned the premises, if we except the above signal effort of his pictorial genius, the globes, the microscope, the telescope, the magic lantern and the skeleton.

'Whelle,' he bitterly resumed, ''tisn't worth while, so I sha'n't do it. I must get what I can for the school furniture and what few sticks the blank has left me, and clear out. You run down to Mortiss & Gripsaw's, Conny, and ask one of 'em to step up here at once,' and he strode off to the schoolroom and sat down on the edge of the platform, the heavy mahogany arm-chair which had heretofore so grandly graced his lofty rostrum, being remorselessly amongst the missing.

Half an hour afterwards, Conny reappears with Mr Barnaby Mortiss, and Fledger, jumping up, takes that

prudent old gentleman into his confidence.

'Ah! good-morning, Mr Mortiss. Altered times with me, sir. Hard times, very hard. The fact is, I sent for you—but let me explain myself. My domestic misfortunes and professional reverses, coupled with the death of my respected father, my own exceedingly bad health, misunderstandings with my pupils and their parents—and so forth, render it imperative that I should seek another field for my endeavours, and, as a matter of course, I must realise upon my present effects; and I wish to do so at once, as—er—to be frank with you, I find there is a one-sided version of my affairs getting abroad in this neighbourhood, which is as exasperating as it is abominably unjust; and I've no means of checkmating it. Therefore, Mr Mortiss, I wish to dispose of everything you see in these rooms; desks, forms, maps, diagrams, scientific apparatus, books, slates, blackboards and curiosities. In the further room, I will show you a valuable collection of easels, drawing-boards, watercolours, chalks, rolls of students' paper, brushes, pencils, portcrayons, and so forth; including a capital telescope and microscope, a magic-lantern, with a fine collection of slides, and a very nice skeleton with cloth draperies. There are some things in the house, too, though they won't count for very much. Now, will you be kind enough to

walk round with me and I'll show you the goods. Then, my dear sir, throw them altogether, and tell me, as a respectable broker, what is the highest figure you can give me for them,' and he proceeded to conduct his wary and laconic old visitor round the schoolrooms, the 'class room,' the laboratory' and the desolate and empty house, the bareness of which was made the more emphatic by a few forlorn articles of broken old furniture scattered about; cane-bottomed chairs, with the seats broken through, a 'Pembroke' table with its wings clipped and a horse-hair sofa full of frouzy, brown holes. Lastly, and very noticeably, a battered and disreputable, aged little piccolo piano, which, brought down in a hurry from the nursery, had been left in the centre of the dismantled drawing-room, the mandate for its final removal having been countermanded.

Barnaby Mortiss trotted about amongst these various properties, with a sheet of foolscap and a pencil in his hands, fingering things over and shaking his palsied head in despairing criticism. Finally, he paused beside Fledger, who, having watched his proceedings, was now standing at the drawing-room window, fidgeting with his cane buttonhole, and looking across the heel-churned shingles in the playground—that would never be crunched again under the grinding capers of his 'young gentlemen.'

'Oh! I forgot, Mr Mortiss,' said he, 'there's those gymnastics out there. Be kind enough to include them in

your estimate.'

'Oh, come, sir, you're makin' too big a mouthful of it for me, altogether,' responded the old broker, in no pleasant humour, 'besides, how do yer think I'm goin' to dispose of all this rubbish, if I do take it off yer hands, in a town like this? I don't buy things for the pleasure of buyin' 'em, sir, an' most o' the stuff I sees 'ere, I 'aven't any use for, none whatever; wherefores, I don't want it. Why, it rayly wouldn't pay me to take it away for nothing, when it comes to bisness—and, in course, it must. As for the furniture, that ain't worth nothing at all. Then there's that skellyton, the tellyscope and micrascope, the magic lantern and things. They're vallyable, I don't deny; but who is there, in a place o' this sort, as 'ud be likely ever to want them? Why, they might be knockin' about down in our shop, takin' up the room and gettin' spylte for more'n

twenty years, afore we ever saw our money back. I mind, when I was up to London last, I cum through a queer ole place, turnin' out of Oxford Street, they calls Hanway Court, and it's full of old curiosity shops and such like. Now, take my advice, and try yer luck up there with them vallyables o' yourn.'

'Oh, I'm not going to cart those things up to London,' interjected Fledger; 'I've neither patience nor inclination

for that just now.'

'Well we're only brokers, sir, and that, too, in a small way; and we can't make yer any bid for them there articles. 'Tain't in our line; furniture, beds, carpets and such like, is what we're a-lookin' for, though we don't mind a pictur now and then, if its a rayl good un. Now there's that boatbedstead as I sold yer wife some time ago. I was a-lookin' for that upstairs, becoz I knows a party as might buy it, but it seems to be gone. As for the peanner, sir, it 'ud eat its 'ed off in repairs, and it isn't the kind of instrument, nyther, that people wants nowadays, so I can't offer yer but vairy little for that.'

'Nonsense! Mr Mortiss, I know of old what you brokers are. You run everything down steady, till you get hold of it, and then when a customer comes along, you run it up,' retorted the principal. 'Still,' he went on after a halt, 'I must sell; I want to save myself trouble, and I want to sell at once, for I'm sick of the whole damned business, so I'm prepared to make a heavy sacrifice. Name your figure, sir, name your figure for the whole lot, and I shall accept

it. I can't say fairer than that.'

'Well, just as yer please, Mr Fledger, just as yer please,' replied the crafty old codger, with an avid glitter in his little grey eyes; 'let me look this over agen then, an' I'll tell yer what I can do.' So he seated himself at the 'Pembroke' table, spread out his inventory, put on his spectacles, and wetting the point of his stubby pencil, set about making a guarded computation as to what he could pay the ruined schoolmaster for those cumbrous remains of his halycon days. Meanwhile, Frederick paced up and down the empty drawing-room, alternately biting his nails and combing his locks with his nibbled and nervous fingers, and Conny sat on the edge of the frouzy sofa, with her hands pressed tightly into her lap, steadfastly regarding, by turns, that hard-

featured, thrifty old broker, and her own misfortunate

parent.

Twenty minutes of painful silence intervened, and then Mr Mortiss, with a hard smile upon his face, threw down his pencil, took off his eyeglasses, and planting his elbows on the table, looked up squarely, and addressed the principal. 'Well, Mr Fledger, I've gone over everything, and providin' I take the good along o' the bad—furniture, forms, desks, apparaytus, maps, diagrams, micrascope, tellyscope, magic-lantern, that there skellyton an' the gymnastics—and the sign-boards outside as well—I think I can offer yer fifteen pound for the lot, though, whether we won't lose in the finish, I'm a-feerd to say.'

'Fifteen pounds! Mortiss, are you mad? A paltry fifteen pounds! Why! why! my dear sir, I'll set to and

burn everything up, just as it stands, sooner.'

'No, you won't, Mr Fledger,' replied the imperturbable Barnaby.

'But—b't—Mr Mortiss, my dear sir, I can't accept it.

It's a sheer impossibility.'

'That's just what I thort you'd say, Mr Fledger; an' I'm very sorry, but I can't offer yer a penny more. That's the very most the things are worth to me, an I don't pertickerly want 'em at that. Nyther do I like takin' advantage of your necessities, sir. Howsomever, you can please yerself; you're yer own master now, I s'pose, if yer ain't nobody else's.'

'Fifteen pounds! Pshaw! make it twenty-five,' replied our Fledge, not noticing the irony, 'and I'll say something

to you.'

Oh, you've said a plenty to me already, Mr Fledger. Why, Lor' bless yer, I'm used to havin' people talk to me.'

'Well, but I tell you, Mortiss, fifty pounds was the very lowest I thought you'd have the conscience to offer, as

true as God's my judge.'

'There, there, that'll do, sir, don't bring the Almighty into it. Besides, tain't a matter o' conscience at all, sir, but a matter o' bizness. The stuff may be worth all the way from fifty to a hundred pound. I don't say it isn't, for I don't know, but that's not the point. I tell yer agen, it's worth next to nothing to us, situated as we are in a little country town. So as we can't agree about the terms, why there's an end on't; and there's no use for us to go on

palaverin' any longer. I wish you a good-mornin', sir, and the inexorable Barnaby reached for his hat, and was taking his departure, when the vanquished schoolmaster called him back.

'Here, sir, here. It's no use, I see, holding out any longer, with a man like you. I'm up in a corner and down on my knees, and well you know it. But I want to get away. I'm a laughing-stock for everybody in this infernal place. I hate the place; I hate the people, and—er—I hate this confounded hole over my head, and everything in it, for hanging as it does round my neck. Now I mean to be free of it, though it did cost me lots and lots of money. So give me the cash, Mortiss, and you can take the goods, yes, every dammed skurrick you can find.'

Mr Mortiss let go of the door handle, came slowly back and groped for a leather bag in his trousers pocket, then he solemnly counted out the coin on the 'Pembroke' table, asked for a pen and ink, made out a specification and receipt, and sticking on a stamp, requested Mr Fledger to sign it, which was accordingly done and the document pocketed. Then turning once more to go away, he said to our vanquished Frederick, 'I'm sorry it's comes to this, Mr Fledger, but a man like you, as is so high in book-learnin' and things, can't expect his deserts in a paltry little town like this, nyther for 'is talents nor 'is property. 'Tain't our faults—the way I sees it. But you made a dreadful mistake, sir, when you set up yer acaddermy 'ere.'

'You're right, Mortiss; I did indeed make a fearful mistake, not only in that, but in many other things, and I only

wish I had my time to come over again.'

'Ah! well, Mr Fledger, you knows that can't be for any on us. So once more, sir, I wish you a good day. We'll begin gettin' the goods out this arternoon,' and giving our poor man a flabby hand-shake, and wide-eyed, rebellious Miss Constance, a riggish pinch of the cheeks, he turned and trotted off, closing the room door after him with pointed punctilio. . . .

I need not dwell particularly upon the happenings of the next few days, for our schoolmaster's affairs having reached their climax, moved on to their natural conclusion.

Fledger himself, now that the exigencies of this painful ordeal had abated, besought his bare laboratory and consulted with himself silently, heavily, dreamily, and for several days, as to where he should go to, what he should do. He was no longer laughable, and had ceased to be picturesque. To his lingering vassals he had described himself as 'backbroken,' and he might have said that he was broken-hearted, too, for, along with the disability to bear his burdens, came the incapacity for making any earnest endeavours.

There was a dumbness among the servants, too, when they realised that the establishment was indeed at an end, all their special pleadings notwithstanding. However, they were constrained to take a practical view of the situation, and began, each one, to cast about for another anchorage. Master Buttons, who, in view of a contingency of this kind, had shrewdly sought of late to ingratiate himself with the folks at the railway station, was 'taken on,' at the instance of Mr Topton, as an odd boy about the waiting-room and offices, with promise of something better in the very indefinite future.

So he exchanged the Fledger livery for a suit of corduroy and a peaked cap with a brass rim, badged in the red initials of the 'Northern Counties Railway.'

Mr Grafton Budd, after much prowling about town and lick-spittle supplication, secured a 'place' as under-gardener with Lawton Bumper, Esq; and Mary Buttox, after advertising her manifold merits for a week in the *Daily Telegraph*, procured a situation at St Bartholomew's Hospital, London.

She had from time to time, instructed Miss Constance, for whom she had a motherly affection, in the rudiments of the culinary art; likewise, plain needlework, with a little domestic medicine, and when she parted from Conny and her father, to leave them quite alone in the old mansion, she bade them an affectionate farewell; asking Conny to be sure and write to her at Bartholomew's, and tell her how things were 'goin' on,' and promising to be a mother to her 'if the wust should ever come to the wust.'

'Well, good-bye, sir,' said she, while shaking hands with Mr Fledger. 'Now don't you mind me a-sayin' of it, sir, but I pities yer I do, from the bottom o' my 'eart; for I knows very well that a man o' your sort, with his head full o' book-learning, is a poor creature at home without a woman to do for 'im and make 'im comfortable.'

'Oh, don't you worry about that, Buttox,' our Frederick

replied. 'A woman has done for me, right enough; though she hasn't made me comfortable. My brute of a wife is at

the bottom of all my troubles.'

'Yes, I knows, sir; but maybe, bimeby, when she's got over her tantrums, she'll be comin' back to yer, or you'll be gettin' lonesome and want to make it up with 'er yerself. Absence, they sez, makes the 'eart grow fond; an it 'ud be the best thing you could do, after all, in my belief. She's the mother of yer children, sir, an', as I understans it, she's got the money; and them are things you mustn't forget.'

'Mary Buttox,' replied Fledger, impressively, 'I'll never set eyes on that woman again, if I can help it, for all her money. She took devilish good care that I never got hold of any of it, all the years we lived together; and the only thing it did was to make her arrogant and upstart and unmanageable and—er—everything else that a wife shouldn't be. As for the children, you know as well as I do, she taught 'em to care nothing about me; and they're all of 'em, from the oldest to the youngest, except my poor little girl here, too confoundedly like their mother for me to care much about them.'

'Well, sir, it seems unnatural for you to talk that way, though you knows yer own feelins best. Try and get a situation up in London then, sir; sumthin' nice an' easy. A church-beadle now, or a verger, or a gen'lman as minds offices, an' keeps the place tidy, 'ud suit you to a ticket, wouldn't it, sir?'

'No, ma'am, it would not,' was the hot reply.

'Well you knows best, sir, I dassay; so good-bye, Mr Fledger, an' mind you look after poor Conny; an' I'm shoor she'll take good care o' you, like a good little lady as she is,' and giving the tearful Constance a parting kiss, she got into the omnibus, from the 'Bull and Beer-Bottle,' that was waiting at the gate, the driver hoisted her trunks on top, shoved her bandboxes inside, slammed the door, and rumbled away with her down to the railway station.

CHAPTER XX

EVANISHMENT

'LITTLE girl, would you like to see the place where I spent the happiest days of my life—the place where your grandmother's buried.'

Conny was seated at the 'Pembroke' table, in a corner of the desolate drawing-room, darning a pair of her father's socks. Mr Fledger was pacing about the wide and carpetless floor, his hands stuffed into his trousers pockets, and he asked that sudden question after a lengthy spell of melancholy silence.

'Yes, father, I think I should. I do wish I'd known grandma, for I'm sure I should have loved her dearly, from the things you've told me about her. . . . Is it far from

here?'

'Not so very far, child.'

'Let's go, father; we can't stay much longer in this horrid place. You're shut up in this empty house all the time, and I hate so much as to poke my nose out for anything; for as sure as I do, I meet some of those girls from the seminary; or if it isn't them, it's someone else that knows us, and they stop and ask me such questions and make such shame-

ful remarks that I'm sick of it. Let's go, father.'

'Well, little girl, I've been turning the matter over in my mind for several days. I've got to do something. I want to get away from the people here, just as you do. Now I've been thinking there's no one knows anything about me at Kendon, for it's an out-of-the-way country village. The people I knew when I was a little boy there must all be dead or gone away, by this time, for it's more than forty years ago. For all that, the place seems more like home to me than anywhere else I can think of. It wouldn't cost us much to live there; and if I couldn't find anything better to do, I might—er—take to the shoemaking again, the—er—occupation I learnt from my father, you know. It doesn't matter now what I do for a living, and we should be out of everybody's way, and have some peace and quietness; and that's what I'm looking after, principally.'

'Yes, father, and I'm very glad,' was Conny's hopeful

reply. 'We'll have a nice little cottage, shall us? And you just see if I won't keep it as clean as a new pin. I'll fit you up a little room where you can make your experiments, that I will,' and she put down her darning and

clapped her hands in delightful anticipation.

Her father ceased his perambulations, patted the top of her head, and sat down beside her on the single remaining rickety chair, and they had a long talk, and settled all the particulars of what they should do. When they went to bed they had already packed up their few belongings, in readiness for departure by the first train in the morning, for thus they had planned to elude the busybodies of Waltonbury.

In the early dawn, therefore, as soon as they had breakfasted, Conny ran over to the 'Bull and Beer-Bottle' to tell Mr Burlygrig to send his 'bus' for them, and accordingly, in half an hour, that much patronised old vehicle drew up at the front door, and Burlygrig himself was

sitting along with the driver.

'Here we are, missy,' he hallooed, as he caught sight of Miss Conny, dressed and waiting, at the bedroom window. Then he knocked the dirt off his heels against the doorsill and entered the open hall-way. 'Where be your trunks, miss?' he shouted up the bald and dusty staircase, and while Conny was hastening down, he made an inquisitive survey of the vacant rooms in pretence of looking for them

'Ah! here they be, all together, in the kitchen,' says he, calling to the coachman. Then they dragged and bundled the luggage out to the omnibus, followed silently by Conny and her father, dressed in their best. Mr Fledger, on the doorstep, turns and locks the door, and walking down to the 'bus,' gives the keys of the premises to Mr Burlygrig, asking him to hand them to the agent, when that functionary comes to take possession.

'I will, Mr Fledger, I will, sir, with pleasure,' cheerfully responds Boniface; 'an' if there's anything else I can do for yer, in the small way, say the word, and I'm yer man. My wife was a-talkin' to me only last night about this affair o' yourn, and I needn't tell yer what she said, but at the wind-up, I remarks to her like this, "Well, I know, Betsy, but misfortunes will happen to the best on us sometimes,

so why not to that schoolmaster over there." It's a queer world, sir, an' I'm sorry for yer, but you must take it as it comes, and make the best on it. Goin' up to London, sir?'

'Not at present, Mr Burlygrig,' replied the hapless Fledger. 'I shall stay for a while in a distant part of the country.'

'That's right, sir; you look as though you wanted a change pretty bad. Here, get in, missy, we're a-waitin',' and Constance, who, girl-like, had been plucking the scantling flowers in the garden, did as she was bidden. Old Burlygrig banged to the omnibus door, and, mounting in front again, told the driver to 'get along,' and father and daughter were hurried away from Waltonbury House; and yet it may be said that if our Horatio had only had the hardihood, which he did not have, to glance back out of the omnibus, as it rattled down High Street hill, at those white-washed gables above, he might have realised that, for all his recent disasters and his present headlong flight, he was leaving a great name behind him, for that monster sign-board, with its mighty superscription, which nothing had abashed, was holding itself proudly up in the morning sun,—superior to the inevitable clutches of sordid Master Mortiss and his minions.

Arrived at the railway station, they were fortunate in escaping general observation. That pest of a Bobby, who was cleaning the inside of the 'refreshment room' window, only caught sight of the fugitives as they passed along the platform; and it was more than his place was worth, to come out to them; so he had to be content with dumb grinning through the window. In at the wicket where Fledger booked for the journey, the ticket-clerk smirked upon catching sight of a segment of his lugubrious countenance, but did not trust himself to say anything more than the customary routine formula, as he stamped the pasteboards and pushed them forward.

'Two third-class singles to Estingham — six-and-six; thank you, sir. Train starts in five minutes from the platform over the bridge. Look sharp, sir,' glancing up at the clock behind him, and a moment afterwards he winks through his wicket at the porters who are labelling the luggage; while Mr Topton outside, who always stands

upon his dignity, holds himself aloof, strokes his chin and superciliously scans those labels on Fledger's trunks and boxes.

At the little side platform, whence the train is about to start, our Frederick encounters an evil genius of the 'Paris Lecture'—unpleasant Mr Braddington, who is going to be a fellow-traveller for a short distance; but as the mutual recognition is not agreeable, our hero gets into a hinder carriage, out of his way, along with a noisy company of farmers and bumpkins. Just as the train is beginning to move, and Miss Constance has settled herself in the corner, old Burlygrig, who has come with them on to the platform, whips out a big bottle of brandy from a pocket in his greatcoat, and tossing it on to Fledger's knees through the window, speeds him upon his journey with these cheery words,—

'There, sir, take a nip o' that now and then as you go along, an' it'll warm the cockles of yer heart for yer. Keep yer weather eye open, sir, and take things easy, an' you'll pull up agen all right. Tuck that there rug, look, round yer daughter's knees; it's a bit chilly these autumn mornin's. There, that's it. Now, good-bye, sir,' gripping Mr Fledger by the hand. 'Good-bye, missy,' patting Conny on the cheek with two of his enormous fingers. 'Good luck to yer both, and a pleasant journey.'

The next instant, father and daughter are swept away from the trotting and jolly faced Burlygrig. The train jolts over the 'points' at the 'junction,' and they are soon racing along in the open country, whose massy foliage, far and wide, is aglow with the graces of autumn. . . .

Conny nestles to her father's arm, as, looking out of window, unheedful of the jovial crew around them, they turn their faces to the pictured, fast-receding town,—to its crowded, red-tiled roofs and gables, by trees ancestral interveiled, whose leafy depths are flecked with the blue of the burghers' breakfast fires; to the stern old abbey, whose towers stand up so gaunt and spectral in the morning air; and back beyond, with painful gaze, involuntary, to the hill-top, cold and clear—even to a master's famous countersign, hoisted spectacular, above the whitened chimneys of a solitary mansion; thencefrom, to our hero's eyes stand forth his signatory, late and lost, in those flaming

Roman capitals he shall never see again—'Waltonbury House Academy; Principal—Frederick Horatio Fledger, Ph.D., F.S.A., M.C.P., Professor of Caligraphy, from Burton College, Mancaster.' Ah! Ichabod! Ichabod! Tis a parting, cruel stab from his own right hand. He suffers his chin to fall upon his breast, and abruptly drops his eyes to that brandy in his lap.

CHAPTER XXI

A SEAT OF THE LOWLY

WHEN restless enterprises, put forth through lengthened years, have brought us nothing but defeat, and manifold disaster has numbed the jaded spirit, commend us to a rural spot, far from the frenzied haunts of men—some nesting-place of quiet folk, whose strifeless days wear on in sweet mansuetude, not bartering they, their hearts' good things for mammon vanities.

May it please us to retreat to some old-time hamlet, then, that is snugly nursed in the swelling folds of sunny hills, verdant vales between; a winding river, intersecting all the countryside in dear variety; with mazy lanes that coax away to leafy nooks, and bowered cottages hid up in bosky dells, that blithesome are, with bo-peep children's merry laughter. In scenes like this I counsel that our spirits seek repose, in thoughts of peace and steadfast resignation to the end. Now much such a place was Kendon some forty years ago. . . .

In a sheltered dale, between two rounded hills, this village lay, curtained and draped in heavy foliage. From the sere, oaken gateway, leading to the ivy-mantled church that crested the southern slope, you looked abroad upon the fruitful valley, closed in with sister heights and dappled with gardens and orchards and stately trees—that shaded winding lanes; and down at the village street beneath, and to the scattering people there, drowsily busy with their domiciliary concerns, so miniature multifarious. Mayhap,

you listened to the sounds of that tranquil life as they floated up to you on the scented air—the ambling rumbling of a horse and cart, the jingle of women's pails round the village-pump, the gladsome voices of children out at play, and the never-failing dog, in barking multiplicity; perchance, the ambulating baker-boy's tinkling bell, or a travelling huckster's sonorous cry—identically repeated, 'Pots, pans, mats, cans; clothes lines, brushes, props'; and abiding over all, the tireless, tuneful ding-dong at the forge, where farmers' men sate round to chat, and the horses champed and whinnied.

Along the vale, wound in and out—the silvery, placid river, imaging the beauties of its banks in softened duplication. Down in the deep hollow, stood the great white mill, half hidden by a giant oak, that doubtless, for a hundred years, had held its spreading limbs aloft; and on the distant slopes behind, stretched farms and gardens, with bowery nooks between, away to the sky-line of

shimmering blue.

Across the eastern meads, apart, the river curved and sparkled, as it wended away to the lonely pool, so deep and inaccessible, where, lustrous in the umbrage of the willows, the village ducks did congregate, and water lilies cradled on the darkling stillness. A lofty, double avenue of elms stretched its splendid length along a further mile of the river's course—unto a lonely churchyard and a solitary tower, surrounded by a crumbling, mossy wall, and closely environed on every side with giant, ancient trees-linden, chestnut, sycamore and fir-that from their massy heights cast down a solemn twilight, seeming to make 'God's acre' there—a holy place indeed. Out against the darkness of those wooded depths stood several ghostly firs, bare to their tops, dead-limbed and grim, guarding like sentinels this hallowed spot, whose seemly stillness no flippant sounds disturbed—nor rambling footfall through the livelong day. The twittering of gentle birds in opening morn, the solemn cawing of the rooks at eventide as they swooped homewards in a phalanx to their nestings round about, the moaning of the night-winds in the sombre circumjacence these were the only trespassers it ever knew, save when some curious stranger from afar adventured through the gate—to probe among the old, old tombs and gaze up at the faded sun-dial and the tower's mouldering walls; eftsoons he stole away in reverential silence. The old churchyard had fallen into disuse, for the people of Kendon for many years had buried their dead in the cemetery on the hill. The ancient church, too, had been demolished after the new one was built, though its tower was left standing. Far from human habitation—weird, abandoned and neglected—this place had long been spoken of as 'haunted,' and the village children in their rambles, and other children, too, of a larger growth, were mindful to avoid the precincts of 'the old churchyard' after dark. Nathless, gentle reader, to this veritable spot I lead you, in taking up again my chronicles of Fledger. . . .

It was evening; the sun had set in a blaze of red and gold. Some crimson streaks remaining on the low horizon were dimly visible through the tangle of the western woods. Through the tall vistas of the avenue a gathering gloom had crept, for the mists were coming up from the river, though high above, the groined and interlacing branches still glowed a russet red, burnished by the parting sunset.

The churchyard lay in pallid stillness, buried in the blackness of the trees. In its farthest corner, the old tower stood up, ashy-grey, against the impenetrable foliage; and those sentinel firs reared their funereal crests behind it into the fading twilight. Everywhere, beneath, out of the long, dry grass, the crowded tombstones rose, a wan and ghostly company; while an aged cedar, standing in the midst, spread down its sable limbs over the ancestral monuments beneath it.

Near to the cemetery's southern wall, two solitary figures are standing, hard by a pale and modest headstone and a flattened grave; a downcast, melancholy man, whose bare, unshapely head is sunk upon his breast; and a squat and whimsied little maiden, who holds his hand. His face is drawn and helpless, here is whimpled with silent tears.

It is Fledger and his daughter Conny. He is speaking to her sorrowfully: 'Yes, it's near upon forty years, little girl, since they laid poor mother here, but it doesn't seem more than twenty; everything comes back so plain. I was only a little tyke; they lifted me out of the coach and held me here for a moment to look at her coffin. Poor mother!

I wonder where she is now, and whether she can see me.'

'Isn't she up in Heaven, father?' came a trembling

inquiry.

Why, yes, I suppose so; for if ever anyone deserved to go to such a place, she did. But it's a strange world, Conny, a strange world; we never can get a glimpse on the other side, and no one ever comes back to tell us what it's like. See if you can make out those words on the stone, child; my eyes don't seem very good.' His Conny stepped close to the headstone, and read him this inscription, in a small and quavering voice:—

SACRED TO THE MEMORY

OF ELIZA FILCHER. BORN 2ND MAY 1789, DIED 28TH NOVEMBER 1825. AGED 36 YEARS AND 9 MONTHS.

'Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, and their works do follow them.'

'Mourn not for my untimely Fate, Kind friends and Christians, all; I needs must heed that mandate great— Our holy Saviour's call.

A little pain, a little strife, I erewhiles did endure. Yet now, I gain Eternal Life, The gift of Jesus, dear.'

'Yes, yes,' mumbled her father to himself; 'how can I doubt it? Mother was a good woman; no pretence about her. What a different place this world would be if all the women were like her.'

'Yes, father,' added Conny, 'I only wish my mother had been like yours, then we should all have been happy together, not miserable and separated, like we are now.'

'Well, perhaps we might have been, child; perhaps we might,' her father dubiously replied; 'and yet I don't know; things have gone wrong with me all through my life. Not once have I seen my way clear to do what I wanted to. It's a funny world, Conny, especially for some people. I wish I'd been taken off along of mother. It had been a good thing for me, I'm thinking.'

He came to a dead stop and cast down his eyes upon the grass and weeds on his mother's grave, chewing the cud of rueful recollection. Afterwards he gazed wearily round at the old tombstones, then into the solemn umbrage of the encircling trees; lastly up at the time-worn tower, near to which they were standing; and the sun-dial's finger, high upon its face, pointed dimly down upon him in the growing darkness. His day was almost done.

'What a lonely place this is,' he remarked looking about

him again with a shudder and putting on his hat.

'Yes, father,' Conny replied, 'and I'd rather not stay here any longer. Oh! what's that,' she exclaimed, as a dark

object swooped and fluttered across her face.

'Don't be frightened, child, that was only a bat; they can't hurt you; though we'd better be trotting back to our crib; it begins to feel chilly. Come along.' Then they turned and wended their way out between the gravestones to the gate. Here our Frederick paused and looked back at his mother's resting-place, then heaving a heavy sigh, and taking his daughter's hand, he hurriedly departed with her down the long and darksome avenue. The crickets chirped in the hedges on either side; a solitary owl hooted mournfully behind them, in the distant woods; the stars came out as they plodded homeward, and it had grown quite dark ere they reached their humble quarters in the village.

Mr Fledger had taken lodgings with a widow woman in 'the back street' close to the smithy. There were two little bow-windows in front of the cottage, divided by a 'half-glass' door, and when you opened the door you set a little bell The good woman eked out a slender subsistence tinkling. with a compendious business, which, albeit of widely divergent interests, took up but a modicum of space, for she displayed the whole of her stock-in-trade in one of those diminutive windows. Her stock consisted of a heterogeneous assortment of rural commodities, suited to the needs of her various patrons. Apples, gingerbread, peg-tops and jumbles; battledores and shuttlecocks, needles and pins; cottonspools, cucumbers and darning-thread; stay-laces, tin whistles, 'farmer's bread' and home-made 'biscuit' (the latter being a name they give in those parts to any kind of plum-cake); also a few quires of fly-specked writing-paper

and some penny bottles of ink, tintacks and lead pencils, 'Morrison's Pills,' pigs' trotters and turnip radishes. Not content with handling all these articles, she also worked at the straw-plaiting for the Whinstable people, at odd times, and was withal a buxom, clean and 'notable person.'

Margy Peables was her name, and she was 'Kendon bred and born'; but marrying a man who was afterwards 'taken on' at the Dartford powder-mills, she migrated with her husband to Dartford, where they lived for a number of years, until one day, Mr Peables was blown to pieces in an explosion, along with an only boy, who had just begun working with his father.

After this catastrophe, poor Mrs Peables came back to Kendon and set up in business; but this had been long before, when yet she was quite a young woman, while now

she numbered fifty years.

With this worthy dame, then, Mr Fledger made his arrangements, hiring the empty shop on the other side of the door, with a tiny bedroom above it, which the widow fitted up 'nice and comfortable' for Conny. There was 'never anything doing, to speak of,' at Kendon, so the shop had been empty for a long, long time, if we except an enormous, loud-smelling musk plant which Mrs Peables had installed in the window, and had nurtured and trained until it had reached up to the scanty dimities above, and concealed the emptiness of the room behind. She put a bed and a couple of wooden-bottomed chairs into this naked chamber for the use of her new lodger, and when she had laid down a strip of old carpet on the clean, bare floor, and hung a black-framed picture of a shepherdess nursing a lamb, done in coloured wools, over the forlorn little fireplace, she told him he could make out very well for the living and sleeping, and he could wash himself of a morning at the kitchen sink, and comb his hair and tidy up at the chimney-glass in her parlour.

For these various accommodations and concessions Mrs Peables charged our Fledger in the sum of two shillings and sixpence, weekly; and inconsiderable as the rental certainly seemed, our Frederick told her that 'it was the very most

he could anyways afford to pay.'

In a few days' time Miss Conny, with the aid of some inexpensive trifles purchased at the village draper's, had prinked out her lilliputian crib upstairs, so as to look like a room in a doll's house, and there she invited her father 'to come and study,' though, truly, it had none of the air of his lost laboratory. Still it was the best she could do, poor thing, and her father, in a measure, was grateful accordingly, and went up sometimes and sat down with her close to the little casement, the half of which she hooked back outside 'to let in the fresh air.' Together they would peep out between the snowy, miniature window-curtains, with a 'mother-of-thousands' hanging in a scarlet flower-pot close to their noses; at the apple-trees and plum-trees in Mrs Peables's yard; and across the lane, at the bottom, to 'old Cubiss's hen-roosts and pig-styes, and would watch 'Jerry' and his brother 'Tim' weaving their wicker baskets in the old cowshed, 'along o' Sandy Jobson, who was a-milkin' o' the cows.'

As for the cooking, Conny could use the kitchen whenever she liked, and all the cooking utensils, and Mrs Peables offered to 'put her in the way of makin' a good many tasty nick-nacks, just enough for her father and herself, 'if she was willing,' and our little maid showed herself exceedingly willing, and was taken into the widow's good graces accord-

ingly, and they became very excellent friends.

Thus much, be it said, then, for the poetry and sentiment attaching to our derelict's bucolic retreat; whilst in respect of the music, though they heard not the pipes of Pan, yet those exercises of the lusty blacksmith and his men, which came up sharp and fresh off the anvil next door, set their ears a-tingling at all hours of the day. So, on the whole, you will perceive that our friends had made quite an approach to Arcadian bliss—Vulcan's proximity notwithstanding. . . .

Now Mr Fledger, when he took up his abode in this happy valley, cherished the fancy that he might attain to some small stewardship with one or other of the wealthy farmers in the neighbourhood, or that he could find some opening for his versatile abilities with the shopkeepers of Estingham. To these ends, therefore, he presently directed his drooping energies, striving, in the first place, by every miserable expedient, to hug to himself his former gentility.

Numerous and bootless were the excursions he made amongst the surrounding homesteads. He found the people there would have none of him. Pompous and persistent, yet betraying his utter ignorance of the duties he sought to assume, he found himself either laughed at for a fool or quizzed as a curiosity.

At Estingham it was much the same. Younger men with readier wits filled all the situations he was looking for, nor could he persuade a single tradesman, for all his self-laudatory appeals, to make experiment of his qualifications. He haunted the market-towns in a circuit of many miles, trusting to find some opening into which he could thrust himself—only to return of an evening, chap-fallen and footsore, to his 'crib' and his 'Conny'; though sometimes he would get a lift coming back in a farmer's cart, or a dangle-legged ride on the 'tail' of a country waggon.

It all would not do; and after he had proven to himself the utter futility of these endeavours, he subsided for a time into torpid despondency, sitting downstairs by himself in the 'shop' on his wooden-bottomed chair, nursing his knees his eyes fixed in front of him upon the shepherdess and her lamb, and his mind in a muddle as to what he should do.

His savings and 'his share of his father's money' amounted together only to a pitiful sum, which must soon melt away in current expenses. He had been notified, too, that no purchaser could be found for the old cobblery in York, while, as for 'that other old sock' and all it had contained, that was now only a dream—thanks to his brother Toby.

By-and-by it occurred to him to start a small business; but a cursory view of the field of operations made it plain to him that he couldn't choose a worse place in all England for such a venture. There was not enough business to go round, and he found besides, upon inquiry, that the good people of Kendon were dogged in their ways and not inclined to transfer their patronages to any newcomer, be he what he might; so he gave up the idea of a 'business,' and that left him in a quondary still.

Yet he clung with pertinacity to this old-world spot, for, back in his childhood, he had been happy here; and although the cooper was long since dead and his family gone away, and he could find few to accord him a doubting remembrance, yet most of the old landmarks still remained, and they linked him with the joyous past. While vegetating thus, he gained opportunity for rest, and was disposed to feel peaceful, while anything but happy.

Conny, who was not of a worrying disposition, nor inclined to be reminiscent of past miseries, with rare filial virtue laid herself out to please her father, and her sympathetic, dutiful nature was insensible to his various demerits. For her to live—beyond mere existence—was to love, to cherish, to continually bestow, habitually denying herself as to her girlish caprices, feeling their occasional insistence indeed, to be reason for self-reproach. She studied her father's moods and fitted herself to them in ready subserviency, ministering alike to his material and mental necessities so far as she was able. When he was sad and taciturn, she would show herself forcefully gay; when he was confiding, she would be eagerly tender; when despondent, invincibly hopeful; and when he was savagely cynical, she would somehow find a kindly excuse. She darned his socks, she starched and ironed his shirts and his collars, and did all the mending besides, though they engaged a woman to come once a month to do the washing. With all this, she would find time to sit with him in the shop, if he wouldn't be persuaded to come up to her little room. Surely the gentle spirit of Eliza Filcher, long departed, was living again within this queer, little, winsome maiden.

She soon made herself proficient, too, in country cookery, and became an adept in the preparation of sweetmeats and confections, and I may confide to you that she followed up this special line of duty with the more adroitness, in that she was by nature an inveterate gournet, like her father, and as fond of tit-bits and comestibles as ever she could be. The season was getting late for 'preserving,' yet she managed to 'put up,' with Mrs Peables's assistance, quite a varied store of good things for their winter use: plum jam and apple jelly, damson brandy and pickled walnuts, to say nothing of the niceties she concocted daily to tickle the palate of her captious daddy, who would have to be in very bad plight when not able to do justice to them.

After dinner, when she had washed up the dishes, her father and she would often ramble over the hills together, amongst the cottagers' gardens, making small purchases of fruit and vegetables from the old goodies they came upon there, and always getting much commodity for little money; or they would wander for miles of hot afternoons, along the dry, cool, pebbly 'Bourne,' in the gracious shadow of over-

hanging trees, gathering ferns and lichens for the little bedroom at home, and clambering up the bank into the sweet, open air as the evening drew on, to return to the village by a short cut across the billowy stubble-field, scaring mother rabbit and her family in the hedge-corners, or along leafy lanes that offered them a ready feast of nuts and berries, of which they failed not to partake, lingering on their way back until it grew dark.

At other times they would cross the meads to the old churchyard, to sit tristfully musing at the mother's grave, or, it might be, 'to neaten it up,' taking a garden-trowel along with them and a few china-asters or dahlias, begged from some cottager on the way, wherewith to lay loving tribute by the old tombstone.

Matters wore on in this wise through all the slumbrous quietude of the waning autumn, until the last of summer had passed away, and the rains came down, and the winds whistled and moaned through the naked trees, and the nights grew long and dark, and the hoar-frost glistened of a morning on the twigs and branchlets, and silvered the grass in the haze of the winter sunshine.

Now they went not so often a-walking. Margy Peables was bidden to light a fire in the shop every day, and our Fledge would crouch over it by the hour together, warming his hands and feet, Conny at work beside him, her father speaking to her but seldom, or not at all, and wondering to himself—still wondering—whatever he was going to do.

And ofttimes, when he had not heeded her queries nor responded to the pleasant things she had ventured to say to him, his little handmaiden would soften the stubborn silence by her gentle warblings—with old chanties she had picked up long before from Mollie Buttox, while that worthy dame was busy in the kitchen at Waltonbury House.

They were the songs of our grandmothers: 'Over the Water to Charlie,' 'Auld Robin Grey,' 'Highland Laddie,' 'The Banks of Allan Water,' 'The Swiss Toy-girl,' 'The Gipsy Countess,' and others. Conny had always liked them; they were human and tender, and mostly—they were sorrowful, and they used vaguely to please her as she sang them over and over to herself in the compulsory solitude of her chamber, when, as often happened, she was imprisoned there by her mother for some spiteful reason, from morning

until night. Of summer evenings, too, her dumpy figure nestled in the curtains of her open casement, her little white elbows leaning on the window-ledge, and her serio-comical face ensconced in the palms of her hands, she had tearfully warbled those quaint, old songs to the quiet skies, while most of the noisy household were rambling abroad, and all had practically forgotten her. Well, she was a little girl then, now she was 'getting to be a young woman,' as she would sagely tell herself, and her adolescent fancies, warming into life, supped a sweetness from those melodies, her childish heart had never known.

Now Miss Constance had an ear for music, as even her Aunty Letty used to admit, and a voice which was low and sweet (which, somebody has said, is an admirable thing in a woman); and it was seldom that her father interrupted her in her little songs; in fact, usually he rather liked them; they acted as a lullaby to his fretful spirit, and the girl knew this, although he never told her so.

Father and daughter were sitting together in the shop one afternoon in the fashion I have indicated. It was dusk, and the fire had burned low. Conny herself, for once, felt miserable. The poor creature couldn't always be cheerful, and the winter weather may have had something to do with it. She had laid aside her mending, and her hands were clasped in her lap. After a while she began to murmur a few wandering bars, and then her voice glided plaintively into one of her favourites,—

'You are going far away,
Far away from poor Janet;
There's no one left to love me now,
And you, too, may forget.
With your gun upon your shoulder
And your bagnet by your side,
You'll be courting some proud lady
And making her your bride.'

'There you go, Conny, your head full of those trashy lovesongs again,' snapped her father, straightening up and dropping the leg he was nursing with a thud, on to the floor. 'No matter how various those tunes of yours, they all harp on the same old string; and I tell you, Conny, this lovemuck is the biggest humbug there is in this humbugging world. The fact is, you're getting to an age now when somebody ought to tell you the truth about it, and as there's no one else to tell you, I will—while I'm in the cue for it, so as to stop you, if I can, from making a fool of yourself, for

I see you're on the road, sure enough.'

The effect of this foreright attack upon Constance was remarkable; it struck her speechless. She seemed to be confronted by some evil genius, so overpowering was the shock to her new-found sensibilities. Her face turned creamy pale, but in a moment quick indignation, not unmixed with shame, mantled it with a painful flush. A yawning chasm had suddenly opened between her father and herself, and she could offer him no reply, but simply stared in his face.

Mr Fledger, heedless and headlong, went on again. stuff they call love, Conny, is nothing but a pestilence. I tell you. An acute distemper in a man and a chronic disorder amongst the women. I know they none of 'em think so—whilst they've got it, but that makes no difference; it's a disease all the same. Why, there isn't a man in all the world, come to know him, that's worthy of anybody's love, and the women are just as bad. But suppose there are some what they pretend to be, and a couple of 'em "falls in love with each other" as the saying is. Well, if they can, they get married, and very often-if they can't. What happens then in the way of hard facts. Why, the man takes a load upon his shoulders that, nine times out of ten, he can't bear. His wife's extravagant and selfish. A pack of children come to town, all to be brought up and put out in life, if they're boys, and husbands found for 'em if they're girls. The expenses multiply every year, and with the average man, they keep his nose to the grindstone for the rest of his

Very likely the woman has no end of troubles too, bad health and what not, making her look so devilish old and ugly, that her husband gets sick of her and casts about for another woman, and then there's the devil to pay. I can't see that you get any happiness out of marriage that's worth a fig; certainly, none of our lot ever did. I hear that your beautiful Uncle Toby and his wife quarrel like cats and dogs, and it's pretty much the same with everybody I ever knew, and I've known a goodish few in my time.

No, I've come to the conclusion that human nature's too selfish for anything of that kind. The further we keep apart from each other the better. So, take care you don't get hanked in with some fellow before you're aware of it, for no matter what he may be in other respects, he's safe to prove a devil in that—he can't help himself—it's ingrain. Keep single, Conny, as I wish I had. Ah, don't I, that's all. See what a wreck I am—in spite of all my struggles through life, and I've been as persevering as I have been damned unfortunate, and it's all owing to me getting married. Nothing in the world else.'

'Oh, father,' broke in Conny, 'this is dreadful. Do you mean to tell me that there's no one in all the world that's

worthy of being loved?'

'Well, pretty much that way, child. One in a thousand perhaps, might be different. My mother was one, of course, but where would you find another like her? As for the men, I wouldn't trust one of 'em out of my sight, not one, and I've had dealings with a good many in my time. I tell you what it is, little girl, people are mostly a bad lot, though it doesn't do to tell 'em so to their faces. Make use of 'em all you can, I don't say anything against that, mind, but never get hanked in with any of 'em in a way you can't get out again, for as sure as you do, you'll discover to your cost how bad they can be.

'Look at that fellow Wardle that I took into partnership with me when I was a young man, why, that scoundrel has given me more trouble in the course of my life than anyone else I can think of, except your mother. He's hunted me all over the country, one time and another, pretending I owed him a lot of money, and if he could drop upon me now, he'd rob me of my last farthing; and yet that man has to thank me for snatching him from starvation. If it hadn't been for me he'd 'a been rotting in the workhouse

long ago.'

There was an interval of stillness, while Conny looked down at her folded fingers. At length she spoke.

'Mrs Peables tells me, father, that she was always happy with her husband, and she thinks of him and loves him still, and hopes to meet him again in the next world.'

'Oh, I daresay,' replied her father, 'she's been plumming you up with a pretty little tale, just the sort of tale a girl of

your age is bound to like. But we've said enough about that love-muck, Conny, all the Peables's in the world wouldn't alter my opinion, so let's change the subject. I'm going to take to the cobbling again, child. I've got to do something, and I can't find anything else to do for the life of me. I suppose I can earn enough to keep our two heads above water, and I've no hopes now of doing any better; it's a pretty come-down for a man like me. But it's either that or the workhouse. . . .

'Well, after all, nobody knows me here, so why should I care? I've been talking it over with Mrs Peables, and she says I'm free to open shop if I choose. So my mind's made up. To-morrow I'm going to Estingham to get the tools and things, then I shall change my name back to Filcher, paint a little sign-board and stick it up outside. I never liked the name of Filcher, but it's good enough for me now.

'Put a little coal on the fire, child, I'm cold.' Then he faced round to the embers in the grate, closed his eyes and nursed his knees; nor did he speak again the whole of that evening, while, as for poor Conny, she had been so deeply wounded as to her innermost parts that she felt no inclination to break the silence, and soon after their evening meal, she sought her pillow in much perturbation, her cherished fancies thrown into chaos by her father's animadversions. . . .

Behold now, a metamorphosis, strange and cruel; a decadency which admits of no retrieval; for our Fledger is seated on a stumpy stool in the middle of his little shop, in the odious garb of a cobbler, having spared himself nothing in the humble appertinences thereof. He is kirtled in leather, collarless and slipshod; his bare, white arms and blemished hands are skirmishing amongst the materials of his lowly handicraft. He has, indeed, made of himself a hybrid of surprising quaintness. His face is garnished with a set and hopeless scowl as he tries his awkward hand in 'half-soling' a pair of old shoes for Mrs Peables, and albeit, the work is not of the neatest, I believe it will pass, that lady being easy to please. Indeed she has promised to busy herself in her lodger's behalf, and has already bespoken for him the curiosity, at least, of several possible patrons, though it seems that he'll have to put

up with some good-natured guying, while proving his footings.

'Mind you du them right,' says the baker's boy, grinning in at the open doorway, as he passes on his rounds, with

his basket of fresh bread and his clanging bell.

'Well, mister, how be yer a-gettin' on?' queries the blacksmith, as he saunters up to the threshold, wiping his brow with the back of one of his immense paws, while he plants the other high against the door-post. 'Sammy,' says he to his little boy, who is peeping in at Fledger, under his father's arm, 'run and fetch them there dancin' pumps o' mine, outen the parlour, and we'll see if master Filcher can patch 'em up a bit; I've worn 'em through at the toe pretty bad a-dancin' in 'em.'

'Gaw ahn, daddy, what d'yer mean?' rejoins the small and unappreciative Samuel, 'you ain't got no dancin' pumps, whatever they be. There's a pump outen our backyard, but that duzzen dance.'

'Come, sir, don't you conteradict me,' growls his father in mock severity, 'or Master Filcher'll sew up yer mouth for yer, won't 'ee now,' he mirthfully inquires of our hero; but Fledger sees no fun in the question, and only responds with a ghastly grin, and an ill-tempered rummage amongst his tools. . . .

A week or two of experimental work, enlivened with badinage like this, found Mr Fledger inured and harnessed to his new avocation. It had galled him at first; for although, as must be apparent to you, he was no longer the MAN he once had been, still the remnants of his pride and his intuitive habit, had led him, if only in a random way, to play the gentleman to the good folks of Kendon; while he had hoped against hope that something would eventuate to give bulk to his pretensions. But these clodpoles had never taken him at his own valuation, for they were shrewd and observant within their own narrow limits. Broadcloth was in plenty about the neighbouring country-seats; they often saw it, knew how it looked, and were seldom deceived by the shoddy. Therefore, when he found that the Kendon people persisted in treating him on a dead level with themselves, he dropped his airs and graces, and sank into the lowly place allotted him; and that too, with less difficulty than he could have conceived at all possible.

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Submissively thus, he worked along at his cobbling all the winter, and well into the spring, with decent application and desultory success. The weather was getting pleasant again, after a long, cold season, and Mr Fledger, in sympathy, was getting to be agreeable too; going out sometimes of an evening to drink tea with his neighbours, and in other ways accepting the logic of the situation, and he might have assimilated altogether with the folks around him, losing his lofty personalities, had not a misfortunate incident, occurring at this time, upset his calculations, stripped him bare to the ridicule of his tormentors, and throwing him into a frenzy of mortification, impelled him to seek obscurity, once for all, in the labyrinths of London.

How this was you shall hear in due course.

CHAPTER XXII

A MERACIOUS CHAPTER UPON MAMMOTH SUBJECTS

It behoves me now, my reader, to tell you something conclusive as to the farings of the gentle Celestia, her hopeful brood, her sister dear, and her sister's Sheepshead.

They have sallied forth in their several ways, in a devilmay-care world. They have departed, too, out of the domain of our patient exercitations, as heretofore sedulously maintained in everybody's behalf, whom they might concern, subordinate as well as principal. Yet I may here advise you that these peoples' doings will bear no further relation to our hero's fortunes, so that we need not dwell minutely upon their subsequent escapades. Therefore, we will follow their careers, in a general way, to a finality, and giving then a valedictory that shall be trenchant and Hogarthian, cast them into limbo for the remainder of this history.

Mrs Fledger went to London with her children and her goods. What her proceedings were for the first week or two, I cannot inform you. She may have had friends in the Metropolis—to steer her clear of the pitfalls which would

naturally be set for a 'lone gentlewoman' like her, fresh from the country, with a little money to spare and the avowed intention of investing it in business, or (which is quite as likely), she may have merely exercised that shrewd impudence, which is predicable of such characters as here, to point out to her the ready way and to keep her feet out of the snares.

However this may have been, she made no mistakes and suffered nothing, from her own point of view. She flattered herself that she 'understood a thing or two,' and believed in herself implicitly. So, within a month from her flight from Waltonbury, we find her fully established as a boarding-house keeper in the New Road. It may be confided to you that her 'establishment,' with several others in the neighbourhood, did not enjoy an immaculate reputation, and when she bought it over, with all the goods and chattels from the retiring proprietress, this aspect of affairs was darkly hinted to her. But she had satisfied herself, from personal supervision, that 'the place would pay,' and she made no objections on that score. It was nothing to herwhat kind of people they had: 'one person's money was as good as another's, and a great deal better,' as her poor father used to say, especially when business was brisk.

She felt a few qualms as to the 'dear children,' but she was an excellent manager and kept them 'out of the way,' and being, upon occasion, a most tremendous virago, as you well know, she found it easy to impose an outward decency upon her guests; which, indeed, was all she cared about, as it permitted her to say, what she was very fond of saying, that, 'as for her neighbours' places, she knew nothing about them, but she kept a respectable house herself and always meant to'; battening up this assertion with a rousing cleanliness and smartness, in house and servants, that stood her in fine stead of any awkward expurgations.

Time passed; the money flowed steadily in, as dirty money often does. The children grew up, but Mrs Fledger gave them only a scant education; for although, in her maidenly innocence, she had espoused a schoolmaster, she had since come to have a strange irreverence for 'booklearning and everything belonging to it.' For all that—the children grew up with their eyes wide open, very wide open, as people's eyes are apt to be when hoodwinked. In fact,

to such an extent did they ultimately expand, that those children came to a full discernment of the niceties of their mother's business, and to a true estimate of the company which graced her more than festive board; and when these things had become perceptible to them, they expressed a loud-mouthed disapprobation and followed it up with various protests of a shockingly practical character, which resulted in a 'general row,' with no settlement whatever as to the questions involved.

After this, it was not surprising that two of our lady's 'young hopefuls' ran off to sea. They had been the pride of her heart, and 'were as like as two peas in a bushel,' though graces identical, formed no part of their similarity.

Well, she never heard from them again—was it due, I wonder, to their rank, unfilial callousness, or was it the silence of inexorable extinction? Who can say? You may think out the likelihoods for yourself; I'll jog you with a few suggestions:

Cabin-boys, or sailors before the mast, and eventual captains, ploughing the high seas; alternatively 'bush whackers' in Australia or 'cowboys' in the 'Wild and Woolly West'; or politicians and 'wire-pullers' in the Land of License, with phenomenal diamonds all ablaze on their gentlemanly shirt-bosoms, and 'double-eagles' of ostentation dangling on the golden festoons that hung at their well-filled paunches.

Beggars or criminals per contra, back within the bounds of their own native shores, or-'most lame and impotent conclusion'—two huddled forms, exanimate, lying at the bottom of the deep, goggled at by 'hydras and chimeras dire.'

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There's a choice for you, reader; take your pick.

A third son of Mrs Fledger's, who had developed a bent for mechanics, got a 'crib' as stoker to a tug-boat on the Regent's Canal; turning out in time a full-blown engineer, especially as to physique, on a cattle-boat of some hundreds of tons burthen, plying between Harwich and Rotterdam; and for aught I know, he is still at his job. Great and lasting may his prosperity be.

One of the daughters, dutiful or otherwise, elected to stay at home and help her mother, in the process of which she gained such lively experiences that she developed into a shameless pariah, going off at a tangent into outer darkness. Years afterwards, though not a great many, when homeless and forsaken, far advanced in mortal sickness, starving and chilled to the marrow, she threw herself headlong into the river, one dark December night, off the steps of Waterloo Bridge, and was duly gathered in by a squad of the Thames' police, passing that way in the morning,—and, albeit she was still 'young,' most piteous to look upon, passably 'fair' and 'fashioned slenderly' enough to suit the most fastidious, yet they 'took her up' without any 'tenderness,' with a business twitch of their strong fingers in her sodden rags, and 'lifted her' out of the water with no special 'care.'

'What's that ahead?' queries the coxswain to his superior, as they paddle along. 'Why, if it isn't another o' them common women, sir. That makes three this week.'

'Yurse, George,' was the superior reply. 'They come pretty thick, this time o' the year.' (It was Christmas, you know, the season of 'glad tidings of great joy' and of shallowhearted charity, everywhere.)

'Easy, men, easy, and let's fish her in.'

'Easy does it, sir. Ugh!'

Then out goes the boat-hook: there's a splash and a wallup, and she's 'fished in' accordingly, and taken away to the deadhouse. That was the way of it.

Bah! what a piping song sings Poesy in the face of bitter Prose.

At the inquest, a little silver ruler, bearing an inscription, was passed up to the coroner, which, it was stated in evidence, was the only thing found upon the dead The man of authority perused the inscription. This was how it read:-

'Presented to Frederick Horatio Fledger, by the students of Burton College, Mancaster, in grateful appreciation of his labours at the College, and as a token of their regrets that he should now sever his connection with them; and they beg to express the earnest hope that he may be equally successful and beloved in the field of his future endeavours.'

'Humph,' said the coroner, 'the gentleman this belonged to appears to have fallen amongst thieves, or else he has shockingly forgotten himself' (a snigger went round the room). 'Yet, it seems strange that he should have taken a trophy like this into every hole and corner. Examine it, gentlemen, if you please,' and he handed it down to the jury; and that sapient body, after much fingering, saw the matter in the same light, no one broaching the idea that this singular memento, so specially treasured, might have belonged to the poor girl's father,—so seldom do we credit the outcast with filial feelings. At the close of the inquest the silver ferule was intrusted to the care of the police, with the enjoinder that they should endeavour to find the 'rightful owner,' which they perfunctorily did, but without success; so it was hung up at last in the inspector's office, on the same hook with a burglar's mask, some skeleton keys and a pair of brass 'knuckle-dusters.' Long may it adorn that apposite assortment.

Mrs Fledger's other daughters drifted away, at different times, into separate humble abodes and various occupations, some of them achieving a sorry kind of matrimony, and the others lapsing into something—well, something that wasn't very much worse, after all; while the belle of the family, Miss Clarissa, got employment, thanks to her flashing eyes and her fleshy figure, in a refreshment bar attached to one of the theatres. From this vantage-ground of midnight flirtations she soared into matrimony of a meteoric sort, flying off with a 'beau' who soon afterwards repeated that trajectory—in solo, leaving poor Clarissa to struggle back the best way she could to a similar, though inferior, position to that she had erstwhile held,—her flightfeathers clipped and herself handicapped with a fine babyboy, the one and abiding pledge of her Clarence's love. Henceforward, you may be sure, her life's harmonies—if there were any—were strung to a minor key.

Now, after a prolonged rumination upon these family miseries, our broken-hearted Celestia (I use the expression much as I should in the case of a broken-winded horse) proceeded to drown her mortifications in a flood of strong drink. This process she repeated and continued ad infinitum, as her lord and master would have said, until she had soaked away that headstrong hardihood which had been her one sterling quality, save the mark! She soon carried these orgies to such an extent as to scandalise even

her own bacchanalian company, who finally took umbrage and definitely took flight.

As an unavoidable sequence, being minus her income, she fell into debt. Then she drank a little deeper (a little was all that was possible) and fell a good deal deeper into debt, until one fine day there came a sheriff's execution; her furniture was sold at auction, under her nose, and she was evicted from her 'respectable boarding-house' with circumstances of unavoidable brutality, and cast upon the street with a few miserable traps which had found no purchasers.

There followed for Mrs Fledger, I need not tell you, nights and days of Stygian blackness, with episodes

unspeakable.

Over these enormities we will draw a veil, but the outcome was that she gravitated into a low coffee-shop in the Borough, ostensibly as part-proprietor with a savage old sot from the 'Emerald Isle,' who used her in the business, for all she was worth and a great deal more, and kept her well under his thumb into the bargain. In this abject condition and abominable locality let us bid her adieu, with the reasonable assumption that she went on descending from depth unto depth, because for such creatures as she—there is seldom a halting-place and never a hope of reclamation.

As to the woman's end, it is possible she died in the workhouse-much moral silt sloughs itself away thereinor was run over and killed in the busy streets while staggering, in a drunken zig-zag, from one gin-shop to another; or she may have ruptured a blood-vessel in a last fit of fury with something or somebody in her vile surroundings; or she may have fallen a victim to the surgeon's knife at the hospital, going there to get relieved from some outrageous growth, the resulting figuration of her foul activities. But whatever the instance was of her 'taking off, we may be certain it was not immeasurably delayed, and that, when she passed away, there was no bereavement. Born of a race of churls, she was the natural foe of everyone with whom she came into contact—of those who belonged to her and of those to whom she might have belonged—so that she was, of necessity, her own unconquerable enemy. Taking all these things into consideration,

the best we can wish her, and all who are like her, is the mercy of complete extirpation. . . .

Celestia Crunch has many affinities and blood relations, whose tales will never be told; yet I give you a summary of her sister's fortunes, offering as they do, some points of curious contrast.

When Angeletta and Sheepshead got to town, upon their elopement, they took lodgings at a 'flash' public-house in the City Road, and had a 'thumping good dinner,' as Miss Letty expressed it, in a snug little parlour behind the 'bar.'

Then they sallied forth to make some purchases, also some shrewd inquiries, returning to their quarters as 'the shops were lighting up,' and resting upon their laurels until the next morning, when the bride-to-be, with an excellent, firm spirit, carried off her mannikin to a 'registry office' in Islington, paid the extra fees demanded for non-residence in the parish, and married him out of hand, like the 'trump' that she was. The ring had been bought at a jeweller's close by (it was the largest the man had in stock). A smirking clerk in the office gave the fair lady away, and the necessary witnesses were scrambled together from the seedy hangers-on.

This crude ceremonial done with, the happy pair drove in a cab to some 'furnished apartments' they had bespoken at Highbury, and, after a seasonable dalliance there and some spirituous fortification, went off to the Crystal Palace for the rest of the day, coming back late to a hot supper at the 'Horseshoe Tavern.' Thence they drove home again to their dovery in the northern suburb, brimful of love, oyster-patties, fat mutton-chops, lobster salad and brandy and water.

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Oh! the glorious time they did have together. It was well worth Letty's thirty-five disconsolate years, to come at last to that extremity of bliss; while, as for poor Nemo, he felt as if the top of his head had been lifted off, and it might as well have been, for all practical purposes.

They never ceased their revelries for a whole month, the lady footing all the bills, like the trump that she certainly was. They raced off to this place; they galloped off to that; they rushed everywhere and did everything they could think of—in the rowdy and jovial way. Of a

daytime, it was Vauxhall, the 'Welsh Harp,' 'Rosherville Gardens' and Gravesend, the 'Rye House,' Epping Forest and Hampton Court, with 'Brighton and back for half-acrown.' At night, they went the rounds of the theatres, to the 'Christy Minstrels,' 'The Oxford,' 'Madame Tussaud's,' and the 'Polytechnic,' finishing up with a late supper at some 'all night' house, and rollicking home to Highbury in a hansom in the wee hours of the morning.

Colics and headaches came between times, but these were not allowed to spoil the programme, and when at last, it was all over, and they had settled down, in dumb satiety, to a little lackadaisical housekeeping, the fair Angeletta looked like a lush-fed ox and her worn-out doxy like a hunted young Bedlamite with one foot in the grave.

Presently, when their pulses had definitely come down from a fever-beat, it dawned upon Mrs Sheepshead that her Nemo 'had better find something to do.' Accordingly they sat on the sofa together one morning and looked up the 'ads.' in the *Times* and, as luck would have it, this opportune issue came under their eyes:—

'A Colonial gentleman, a widower, with plenty of means, wishes to engage a tutor for his two sons. One who will have no objection to making his home in the Antipodes. Married man preferred. Liberal salary.—Apply personally, between 9 and 10 A.M., or by letter, to Lenox J. Merryweather, Burridge's Hotel, City, E.C.'

Here was a splendid opportunity for her Nemo, thought Mrs Sheepshead, who herself was ready to go anywhere or do anything, Nemo being in the same condition; so she hustled him off the sofa to the writing-desk in the little baywindow, to send an instant reply, which was backed up next morning by Nemo's personal attendance upon Mr Merryweather, Angeletta going with him in the omnibus and walking up and down outside the hotel until her spouse came and fetched her to take part in the conference.

'My wife, Mr Merryweather, sir,' and Letty was inducted into the presence of a vast and leonine gentleman, in the primest of life, and the pinkest of fashion, and teeming at all points with 'plenty of means'—patent-leather boots and drab gaiters, a bunch of heavy seals to his ponderous

watch-chain, diamond rings on both little fingers, a big ruby scarf-pin under his chin, more diamonds on his frilled shirt-front, and a gold-mounted cane, as thick as a club, lying in front of him on the table, beside an elegant stand of cordials and a silver ash-pan for his fragrant cigar.

'Oh!—ah!—yes!' exclaimed this Austral buck, rising to his feet and sitting down again; 'good-morning, Mrs Sheepshead. Ha, ha, what a funny name it is; but there, mine's a queer name too. I've about concluded, madam,' putting his cigar down in the ash-pan and eyeing her over with a sudden appetency, 'to take your husband back with me to Melbourne. Now, are you agreeable—and—er—in fact, are you ready to go with him?'

'Certainly I am, Mr Merryweather. I want to go about

and see life. Is it a nice place?'

'Slap-up place, madam,' and Merryweather slapped his fist down upon his fleshy thigh, to give accent to his encomium. 'I've lived there for twenty years, and there I've made my money. It's a grand place, I tell yer. But what sort of a sailor are you?'

'I've never been on the water, Mr Merryweather, so I don't know; but it's a hard thing that's going to hurt me.'

'Bravo! madam, you're made of the right stuff, I can see. Well, then, we'll regard the matter as settled. Come up here, both of you, and take dinner with me to-morrow evening at seven sharp. Mr Sheepshead can bring his referentials, and we'll make out a little memorandum. My ship sails on Saturday, so you'll have to get ready on the double quick.' Then jumping up again, and giving the bewildered Nemo a crushing hand-shake, he showed them out of the room, bestowing upon the fair Angeletta, while turning to say good-bye to him, a hungry leer as he closed the door.

At the little dinner, on the following evening, the doings,

to say the least, were inordinately reprehensible.

As soon as his guests arrived, Mr Merryweather, who was all geniality for the occasion, carried them off to 'a quiet place off the Strand' where, as he was kind enough to explain to Mrs Sheepshead, they could be 'free and easy' and yet have 'the best of everything.' And certain it was, within that 'quiet dining-room,' into which they were obsequiously ushered, with its heavy crimson hangings, its

sideboards of silver and its dazzling candelabra, the easiness proved to be absolute and the *menu* profuse; albeit the quietude was not profound, as a lusty chorus in an adjoining room was bawling out the strong points of

'Champagne Charley.'

When everything was in readiness, Merryweather drew up to the table, with Angeletta close upon his right and Nemo at a respectful distance to his left, a foxy little waiter dancing around them to the tune of a two-guinea tip. Truffles and turtle soup, partridges, venison, boiled turkey, endive, artichokes and celery, with side dishes to match and kickshaws innumerable—loaded the board, besides pineapple, apricots and hot-house grapes, and wines and spirits of the 'choicest brands'-'cognac' and 'Kinahan,' and the favourite 'Cliquot.' It was a spread fit for a nabob, and our friends did it rabid justice. But towards the finish, by a covert pinch of powder from the waiter's fingers, Nemo's jovial cup was rendered promptly soporific, and that poor young greenhorn flung himself in due course, upon the sofa—to sink into irreclaimable slumber. the insidious waiter was given the wink to depart, and the coast was left clear for further enterprises.

Oh! Lenox J. Merryweather, you lion-rampant of iniquity.

'And so, my adorable, it's a nactual fact, eh, that you're married to that whippersnapper there?—that little, sickly, insignificant, albino whelp—a fine woman like you?'

'Yes, but I think it was because I couldn't seem to get anybody better. Just you remember, sir, I've been stuck

in the country all my life.'

'Well, upon my soul, and what if you have?' and he looked Letty all over, and right in her eyes, so that her libertine blood leaped upward to the roots of her hair.

'By George,' he exclaimed, grasping her hand with a warmth that was unmistakable, 'I call you a splendid woman! Such raven-black hair! Such glorious eyes! Such ruby lips! and—whieu-u-u, what a figure it is too!' looking her all over again. 'By jove! you're altogether a magnificent woman, that you are, and to think that—that,' knitting his brows and thumping his thigh in a paroxysm of futile jealousy; 'well—it's no use thinking of it. Don't gaze at that damned little rat over there, but listen to me.

Why, I've been looking for you all my life and didn't know it; and now you shall be mine, come what will.' He flung his strong arm around her and drew her up to him with the force of a vise. 'Yes, by thunder! you shall.' He was a big and fervid fellow, this Lenox J. Merry-weather, and not unhandsome—in a sensuous way. He was, besides, the very personeity of Angeletta's maiden dreams, His, was the rich, deep voice, the blazing eye, the massive frame; all that aggressive carnality was his—for which she had so long and passionately yearned. The rings and the diamonds, too; the confident, arrogant, easy affluence of the man, appealed to her selfish, pleasure-loving instincts giving her foreprisement of a luscious time to come that might well be the fruition of her life-long hopes and keen desires.

For a moment, inadvertently, she cast her eyes behind her upon the emasculate, stupefied wretch—sprawled upon the sofa, only to turn them back at once upon the hotblooded gallant so close at her side. The contrast was quite too much for her. Fealty, affection, duty, even pudicity, whatever strains of these might have owned a frail tenure in her graceless bosom, instantly took flight, and yielding herself to his urgent embrace, the woman succumbed.

Plaything Nemo was left in the lurch.

A few minutes later, the waiter and a 'cabby' fetched the drugged victim out of that otherwise deserted diningroom, dumped him stealthily into a 'four-wheeler' that was in waiting outside, ambled away with him through the midnight streets, and laid him darkly down and left him, in his tarnished evening attire, on the doorstep of his 'dovery' at Highbury, 'to come to himself,' in all his damnification, and to blink his eyes at the opening day, a milkman's wonder and a landlady's horror, in the drizzly autumn dawn.

'Where was you married, my bewtie?' charily inquired Lenox J. of his paramour as they were going downstairs in the morning to a very late breakfast.

'Oh, at a registry place in Islington.'

'Hah! that's no marriage to signify. We'll knock that all to smithereens when we get over on the other side.'

'Suppose he should follow us though and make trouble? I shouldn't wonder, for he's madly in love with me.'

'Tut! tut! not he. The fellow hasn't spunk enough;

can't you see that by his jib? He's as meek as a sheep—Sheepshead, you know. Ha, ha, ha! a glorious name for him, by Jove!—though it's a damned bad one for you. Come along,' and he handed her into the breakfast parlour.

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Well, she died and was buried—and buried, was forgotten. Now tell me where the place is for such a soul as hers?

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Mr Lenox J. Merryweather was taken off in a fit of apoplexy, one day, unexpectedly, but he left his inamorata with 'plenty of means.' Her grief was not excessive, nor was her subsequent existence a blank of dumb despair, although her natural fires were burning low. She never knew sorrow in the proper acceptation, and she lived her residuary time away in selfish easements and creature comforts, suffering only at the very last, what e'en the best of us must suffer, when the dread Reaper draweth nigh.

Well, she died and was buried—and buried, was forgotten. Now tell me where the place is for such a soul as hers?

How it fared ultimately with Nemo, I cannot positively inform you, though it was remarked, quite recently, that he might be seen 'pottering about' in a queer little bookshop in queer Little Britain. Once, though, in the course of his earlier wanderings about London, in search of 'a place,' he ran up against the vivacious Quelch, to whom he had on a previous occasion confided the facts of his, then, recent elopement, and would you believe it, that unfeeling rascal, who had contracted a habit of laughing at everything and everybody, fairly bubbled over and squealed with his disgraceful cachinations, now that poor Sheepshead unburdened to him, in a dolorous whine, the weight of his woe. 'Oh, Mr Quelch, sir, I don't suppose you've heard of it, but I must tell you, for I'm so unhappy, my wife's run away, sir. Gone without any cause; her heart's as hard as a flint.

can't you see that by his jib? He's as meek as a sheep—Sheepshead, you know. Ha, ha, ha! a glorious name for him, by Jove!—though it's a damned bad one for you. Come along,' and he handed her into the breakfast parlour.

A couple of days afterwards, Angeletta sat in her stateroom on hoard the Southern Cross, bound for Melbourne. They had put her down on the passenger-list as Mrs Lenox J. Merryweather. Her 'gentleman' had just repaired to the smoking-room, but he had thrown a fine Indian shawl over her shoulders, for the window was open and the sea air was chill, and had plumped the last new novel into her A heavy wedding-ring and 'keeper' fixed a bogus seal of wifehood on her perfidious hand (she had dropped poor Sheepshead's ring into the water), and as she gazed through the window at the fast-receding shore, an unbidden vision crossed her mental eye. It was the tearful, helpless face of that wretched simpleton she had She felt no regrets for what she had done. She nursed no sentiment of sorrow, but in that brief moment, once for all, it was given her to know-how heartless and shameless and worthless she was.

Up on deck, by himself apart, sat the young man who was going to be 'tutor for the two boys.' Merryweather had secured him, at the last moment, through an 'employment office.' He was wan and thin and threadbare, sickly and silent,—this pitiful waif of gentility, and as he, too, gazed upon the vanishing shores of his native England, he dwelt upon the blighted hopes of his past, and fearsomely shrank from his future. He thought of his classmates and companions at college, of his brothers and sisters scattered far and wide, of his father's recent death, their ruined home, and of that mother, he so dearly loved, he was leaving far behind him. While, with it all, a monitor within seemed to whisper to him, 'Thou shalt see her Poor fellow! and he never did. face no more.' 'look on this picture and on that.'

Angeletta flourished famously in Australia. Her ribald forces had full sway. She never lacked anything of her soul's desires, so long as her 'colonial gentleman' lived. It is true he neglected to 'knock' her marriage with Nemo

into the promised 'smithereens,' or to supplement it with nuptials of his own; but then his Letty had no hair-splitting proclivities, and troubled not her head over such niceties as these.

Nor was he faithful to her, understand. She wasn't the woman who could lay herself out to gain the lasting allegiance of any man, neither was he, in any possible case, the one who could be leal. 'Free and easy, free and easy,' that was the motto for him, and he honestly strove to live down to it. Still the fellow wasn't ungenerous. His money flowed easily in, and he freely and easily gave Letty the benefit of it. Had he ceased to be prosperous, it would surely have been otherwise; any sacrifice or self-denial, in a downright sense, being simply impossible to a character like his.

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CHAPTER XXIII

A NUMBERLY BY ITS MECERIFI

Lat in them to our Fledger.

There was a big school at Langley Dutton, a few miles from Kendon,—a 'proprietory academy' conducted by a Dr Duttopie. Now this gentleman counted amongst his friends, a certain college chain whose pursuits and labours, akin to his own, had taken him away, long before, to the North of

England, and held him resident there.

This scheeiman had recently entrusted a nephew of his to the doctor's care, with the enjoinder to 'bring him up like a gentieman.' Affairs of business sometimes brought the uncle to London, and when they did he would take a run down to Langley Dutton to see his nephew, and an afternoon's jaunt in the neighbourhood would often be included. It was during one of these outings that a trivial thing occurred which bore a painful consequence—the triviality with one person, the consequence to another. It came about in this wise.

The uncle and nephew had tramped smartly away across breezy fields, greatly enjoying the verdancy of spring, when the senior began to complain that his shoe was hurting him. A brief examination showed that a nail had worked its way through the sole and was galling his foot. Walking back to Dimple's, under these conditions, promised to be a serious matter, and the question arose what was to be done. 'We're close to Kendon, uncle,' said the youth, 'and I know a short cut that will take us down into the village in ten minutes, and we're safe to find someone there who can put that to rights.' So they took their way over the shoulder of a cosy hill, down through a paddock and a farmyard and along a winding lane, and found themselves in 'Kendon back street,' where, after making some inquiries and getting some directions, they walked on past the blacksmith's, opened a glass door—which rang a little bell, and walked into a cobbler's shop. The cobbler looked up from his lowly stool, it was Mr Fledger. His visitors looked down. they were Dr Bolderlash and Leonard Aldermaston.

1 spare you the impromptu eloquence upon this acute

occasion, it was of such a very objectionable description. I leave you to imagine the force and thrill of it (we may often think what we dare not say). Surprise and fury and indignation—confusion, pity, consternation, with a shower of expletives on one side, and a stream of invective on the other, interlarded with a cool douche of pleasantries from the 'young gentleman' in the case, made together—a riot so exceedingly pungent that it brought Mrs Peables in from the kitchen, and Conny downstairs, from her attic window, where she had been watering her 'mother-ofthousands.'

After the explosion had spent some of its force, Dr Bolderlash was bidden to take his 'measly jobs' down to a certain dread locality, the exceeding caloric of which (according to general acceptation) would have proved highly prejudicial to a gentleman of the doctor's temperament. This hot valedictory, however, left him no alternative but to depart, which he forthwith did, followed by the zestful Leonard, who, while bestowing upon our Fledge a parting quip, got such an instant return for it on the shins, from a well-aimed boot, as to make his exit almost as lame a one as his uncle's.

'What does it all mean, sir!' inquired Mrs Peables, as soon as they were gone. 'He looks a nice gentleman. How you did becall him, to be sure. I never thought you had such a temper, Mr Filcher, never.'

'Becall him, indeed! Such a temper, eh? Mrs Peables, he's a foul enemy of mine. You don't know all, if you did— Conny, that devil of a Bolderlash means to hunt me to the ends of the earth, I can see; and very soon I shall have all those hell-hounds upon me again. Now what am I to do? Just tell me what I am to do? One thing's certain, I must clear out of this place, like I did the other; damn it, like I have every other, where I thought I could settle down,' and he rushed off upstairs with Conny, leaving Mrs Peables to think it all out for herself.

Meanwhile, father and daughter had an impassioned conversation, in which she persuaded him, all she could, not to

go away from Kendon.

'Dr Bolderlash only came here by chance, father, and, you may depend upon it, he'll never come again. Besides, what if he should bring some of those people here from Waltonbury? Why should you care? You've done with 'em now.'

'Conny, you stupid child, can't you see they mean to set everybody in this place against me, so as I sha'n't be able to earn my living? That scoundrel didn't come here by any accident; not he. I'm up to his games, and I tell you I won't stay here to be a laughing-stock for those clodpoles. It was bad enough at Waltonbury, but here it'll be a damned sight worse. I buried myself in this little place to be out of their way. Now they've unearthed me, it's time for me

to be going—and I won't be long about it.'

Later in the day, Constance talked with Mrs Peables upon all the painful subject, taking that lady into her confidence to an extent that was not discreet; and when a combined attempt was made in the morning, to dissuade Mr Fledger from his purpose, he discovered how matters stood, and brought their arguments to a sudden conclusion, by clapping on his hat and walking off to Estingham, where he went to the news-dealer's and bought a London paper, sat him down in the shop, and studied the advertisements. Then he borrowed some writing materials of the shopman; wrote several replies and posted them. On his way home, he wandered about the fields, returning to his quarters late in the afternoon, savage, disconsolate and hungry. It was plain to maid and matron that they could do nothing with him, so they fed him and left him.

After that, he went every day to Estingham, to answer advertisements, though nothing came of it for several weeks. He was getting desperate, when upon a certain sunny morning, his eyes fell upon the following singular insertion

in the Daily Telegraph:

'Wanted, a respectable elderly man, as waiter and doorkeeper to a club; one preferred who can reply intelligently when spoken to upon ordinary topics.—By letter only, stating age, qualifications, etc., to Enos Huckaback, Hon. Sec., "Forty Winks Club," The Wheatsheaf Inn, Hampstead Hill, London, N.W.'

For this peculiar job Mr Fledger despatched an immediate application and was gratified at receiving the subjoined reply, next morning, at the hands of the village postman:—

'Your answer to our advertisement duly to hand. You'll suit us very well, if you are all that you say you are. The salary is low; fifteen shillings a week. You wouldn't be wanted until six o'clock in the evening; you could utilise the day-time as you pleased. You can try the place. We'll leave it open for you a couple of days.

Enos Huckaback, Hon. Sec.

"Forty Winks Club,"
THE WHEATSHEAF, HAMPSTEAD HILL,
LONDON, N.W., May 16."

An hour afterwards, our Frederick announced to Conny and the landlady that he had 'secured an appointment in London,' and should have to leave 'forthwith.'

'You can stay here for a while, Conny, with Mrs Peables, but I must pack up and be off to-morrow, and I'm devilish glad of it.' As an earnest of his intention, he paid Margy what he owed her, and began putting together his meagre properties. They plied him with entreaties to stay at Kendon, but without avail; and later in the day, when Conny had convinced herself that her father was determined to go, she repaired to her own little room, dismantled it of its girlish tricksies, laid them away in her trunk, and otherwise made ready to accompany him, for the idea of suffering her father to leave Kendon without her—never once crossed her mind.

The parting, next morning, between Conny and Mrs Peables was quite an affecting one, the good woman taking her into her own bedroom an hour before starting-time and treating her to much kind advice mixed up with huggings and kisses. 'My dear,' said she, 'you haven't any mother worthy of the name, and it's a dreadful thing for an innocent girl like you—to be cast out in the world, without anyone to protect her; for I can see there is very little dependence to be placed upon your father'; to which solicitudes and a great many more, the docile Constance gave a grateful ear.

Then Mrs Peables proceeded to cram the girl's trunk with a store of household requisites, with underclothing for herself, besides a variety of useful knicknacks, taken out of the shop, which she squeezed into the spare corners between the heaped-up 'things.' 'There, my dear,' she concluded, as she jumped up on the gaping lid, so that

Conny could lock the trunk, 'you'll find they'll all come in handy some time or other. Your father's nothing but a baby at housekeeping, and such like, and even if he wasn't, a girl of your age doesn't want to be running to her

father for every mortal thing."

By-and-by, as they sat on the bed together, Farmer Patten's waggon drew up to the door, to take Mr Fledger and his belongings to the station at Estingham; so they went downstairs; the trunks were taken out and laid in some clean straw in the bottom of the waggon. Mrs Peables shook hands with her lodger and wished him 'good luck and good-bye,' bidding him to be sure and write to her sometimes and to let Conny come down and stay with her, after they'd got settled. Then she hugged and kissed her tearful savourite for the last time, helped her into the waggon beside her father, told her not to cry, there was a dear, for she should soon see her again, and clapping a bag of 'comfits' into her lap, ran into the house to hide her own tears. 'Sandy Jobson' whipped his horses, and Mr Fledger and his 'little girl' took their mirthless ways to Estingham and London.

Arrived in the Metropolis, they had a scramble dinner at an eating-house at King's Cross, drove thence in a cab to the Caledonian Road Station, and there took the train for their journey's end. It was late in the afternoon when they arrived at Hampstead, and leaving their luggage at the station, they set out on a search for lodgings, which they soon found to be 'very unreasonable,' as our Fledger

expressed it.

'We want two small furnished rooms at five shillings a week, and the cooking done,' explained the poor man to a consequential person, the card in whose window informed

him she had 'Apartments to let.'

'Oh! if that's what you want, you needn't come bothering here. We let to gentlefolks—them that comes up from the city for the fresh air. You're from the country, I presoom, or you'd know this is the 'ealthiest spot round London. You may get suited in some pokey place in the back streets. Go and try. These lodgings are for respectable people,' and she shut the door in Frederick's face.

A few more experiments of this kind, with similarly

painful results, convinced Mr Fledger that he must indeed seek a shelter in the purlieus; and this he did, along with his Conny. Their search lasted far into the evening, but at length they lit upon a ramshackle dwelling, at the bottom of a blind lane, where the needed accommodations could be had. A slatternly woman with a baby in her arms, and a couple of squalling youngsters hanging to her skirts, showed them her 'two nice rooms upstairs, at five shillings a week, cooking included.' They were dark and cramped and evilsmelling, for the 'best room' looked out on a livery stable. There was only one bed, but the 'lady of the house' offered to make up a bed on the sofa for Conny.

Mr Fledger closed with the offer, for it was the best he could do. So they had their trunks brought over from the station, made a dismal survey of their lugubrious quarters, and—tired and hungry—went and had supper at a coffee-shop in the High Street.

CHAPTER XXIV

PLEASANTRIES AND REQUITALS

WE have now arrived at an intervenium in our hero's fortunes. Two epochs lie apart. Call them Fledger the Free and Filcher the Enslaved, or Fledger in the Country and Filcher in the Town: and the rift between them is so complete, that an opportunity offers, before proceeding further, of doing justice to a valued friend, who has hitherto appeared to you only as a censor—stern, ironical and heartless withal. So let us give him a page to himself for his final farewell.

Here is a letter which Dr Henry Hartram Bolderlash sent to his sister at Waltonbury, after getting home from his rencounter with the cobbler of Kendon.

'Arlington House, 'Higher Hampton, Mancaster.

'DEAR TILLIE,—I'm thinking you expected to hear from me before this, and indeed, I should have written last

week, only I was called up to London,—so I ran down to Langley Dutton, and have only just returned.

'Leonard seems to be making fair progress at the doctor's school, and I don't regret persuading you to send him there.

'How the boy is shooting up; he's nearly as tall as I am. It makes me wish I had been a benedict all these years, for, by this time, I might have had just such a boy of my own. Well, if I can't have a son, I must put up with a

nephew.

² Leonard and I had a walk the other day, with quite a surprise for both of us, at the tail end of it. We had been trudging along for an hour or so, when a nail in my boot began to hurt me. Leonard, who seems to know all the country round, told me we were close to a little place called Kendon, and if I could hobble along till I got there, we should find someone to draw the fang. So on we went and found a cobbler's in the back street. When we entered the shop, who should be squatting there, with an apron up to his chin, sleeves tucked up and dirty paws, but the late Principal of Waltonbury House Academy, "Frederick Horatio Fledger!"

'It was a fact, Tillie, and you can judge of our astonishment and his dismay, when we suddenly faced each other. Yes. He had forsaken the halls of learning to worship again at St Crispin's shrine; had abandoned his rostrum, with all its glories, for a cobbler's bench and a three-legged stool; had thrown away his gown and mortar-board for a leather apron and a bundle of wax-ends. It was incredibly marvellous and prodigiously absurd. Fledger's activities, you will therefore perceive, are now confined to the merest fundamentals, and never rise above the groundwork in anything, though it must be owned he still ministers to the understanding. Alas! for the indignities of Topsyturvydom. Your great man has come to his last resources.

'Well, as soon as he saw us, he showered such a storm of abuse upon us that I was fain to return him some rather pointed rejoinders, Leonard doing his share, as I needn't tell you. Afterwards I tried to talk reason with the fellow, but he wouldn't hear it, and was so loud-mouthed and profane that people passing along began to stop and look in at the door. So we thought it best to vacate and go to another cobbler's down in the village.

'After all, I'm sorry for this Fledger, now he's left off

playing the humbug. I shall go and see him again, though he hates me like Lucifer, and shall make it plain that I am determined to be his friend.

'But to change the subject; I particularly wish Leonard to complete his education here, Tillie, and he ought to come up after next term. I'll see that it costs you nothing, from first to last. Besides, I shall have opportunities of . putting him out in life when the time comes; think it over, little sister, and give your consent.

'Tell Mabel, the next time I get round to Waltonbury, I'll bring her a budget of books; and some that she doesn't dream of. Tell Mattie too that I haven't forgotten her doll's house. I have it here, in my study, crammed with "furniture," and only waiting to be packed

up, so she may expect to get it very shortly.

'Now I must conclude, with love and best wishes to all.— From your affectionate brother, HENRY.'

Dr Bolderlash, was as good as his word—in the matter of going to see Mr Fledger again, for one day, while revisiting at Dr Dimple's, he rode over by himself to Kendon. But the cobbler was gone, so he had an earnest conversation with Mrs Peables about him, and learning from her that her lodger had 'secured an appointment in London,' that she had heard from his daughter, and that by what she had said 'they didn't seem to be making out very well,' he sat down in the shop and wrote Mr Fledger a draft on his bankers for £100, and enclosing it in an envelope, without comment or explanation, enjoined the good woman to send it to him the next time she wrote; then he bade her adieu, mounted his horse and rode away.

At home, afterwards, he formed the purpose of 'looking Fledger up one of these days, when he was in town,' but from one cause or another the visit was postponed from time to time, until when he did go, his quest was fruitless, the bird had flown, and he never saw Fledger again.

CHAPTER XXV

A CHEERY HOSTELRY

THE 'Wheatsheaf' on Hampstead Hill was a mongrel inn—of an oldish type. It was antiquated enough, in its general air, to take you back to the coaching days, and to the cutpurses who then and there abounded, yet sufficiently garnished in modern guise to hold countenance with the

gaudy 'gin-palace' on the opposite side of the way.

It was a roomy building, long and low, with barn-like stables clustered in its rear-amidst the shrubbery, and fronted on a green-sward, where the high road forked and curved. A pretty, leafy, restful spot was this, provided with seats for the weary climbers of Hampstead Hill, lightly fenced in with posts and chains and surrounded with umbrageous elms, which shaded the busy roadway all the day, and wrapped the hostelry in their coverture at night. But in the morning sunshine, the dusky tiles of the gabled roof made a sharp contrast with the fresh, creamy paint on the inn's rugged walls. The little casement windows, strung up in an uneven row under its eaves, were neatly furnished with white and curtained in red, and you could fancy them winking at you about the cosy four-posters, chintzes and dimities with which the bedrooms were furnished. Below, to right and left of the broad, open doorway, stretched the tavern windows. All snugly masked were—they with wire screens that told you in sober 'round hand' of the 'chops and steaks' that might be cooked for you there; of the 'billiards and pool' you might play beneath that old rooftree with your boon companions, and of the 'good beds' upstairs, wherein you might sleep away the effects of an evening's booze.

'Wines and spirits' in bottled heaps, were crowded close behind the tavern window-panes, in company with the mistress's geraniums and broad-leaved, well-watered

hydrangeas.

Everything suggested the best of cheer—with sturdy hospitality. A brilliant, rigid sign-board, fastened extraneous, along the uneven front, gave, however, the true metropolitan dab to the quaint old place, telling you, very

plainly that it was 'Truman, Hanbury and Buxton's Entire,' while the horse-trough out on the curb and the gilded wheatsheaf swinging on a tall, white post beside it, took you back into the country—where by custom they belonged.

In at the open door-way, all was clean and smart, from the brisk and bustling barmen in their spotless aprons, to the flagstone floor, that, early every morning, was scoured and sprinkled with silver sand. The 'bar' was resplendent with mirrors and mahogany. Dainty little barrels with dainty little taps nestled behind the splendid 'beer engine,' daintily branded too, for their respective 'cordials—' 'Noyean,' 'Peppermint,' 'Shrub,' and 'Cloves,' while in gilded free hand on the lustrous walls, appeared the customary spoutings of a London 'pub.'—'Martell & Hennessey's Brandies,' 'Bass's Pale Ale' and 'Dublin Stout,' 'Kinahan's L.L. Whisky,' and 'Fine old Jamaica Rum.' It was plain that this roadside inn, however countrified it might once have been, was now conducted on a London basis.

The walls of the long, low tap-room were embellished with a collection of coloured prints, in black frames, of the various gentlemen who had graced the 'Prize ring,' from the earliest down to the latest times,—from Crib and Molyneux to Heenan and Tom Sayers. Yes, there they all were, a copper-skinned, doubled-fisted, bloodthirsty lot, in militant couples and bristling with battle. The broad parlour was hung quite round with a similar complement of hunting pictures, the hounds and huntsmen all in full cry, and taking impossible leaps over giant fences, and these were supplemented with portraits of favourite jockeys, and of horses that had won the Derby.

From all which, my reader, you may gather, that the good old 'Wheatsheaf' was a 'respectable,' sporty, substantial, yet anomalous 'house,' and as admirably adapted, as it was situated, for the trysting-place of that most substantial, conservative, respectable, and anomalous

sodality, the 'Forty Winks Club.'

CHAPTER XXVI

THE 'FORTY WINKS CLUB'

MR FLEDGER (let me still call him by the old name, in respect for his past achievements) stood, irresolute, dazed, and shabby genteel, in front of the bar at the 'Wheatsheaf.'

'Well, sir?' sharply queried a curly-wigged little potman, with a turn-up nose, to whom it was plain that our poor man was not a customer, 'what d'yer want—eh?'

'Oh! er—is this the "Forty Winks Club"?'

'No, sir, it ain't; it's the "Wheatsheaf Inn."

'Yes, of course, but I meant to say, does the "Forty Winks Club" meet here?'

'Yes, they do, but you can't see 'em, if that's what yer want; our orders is strict, not to let a soul go into the big parlour of a heavnin', after five o'clock, except Sundays, when the club don't meet. B'sides, they never give away nothing to nobody. Stand out o' that gent's way, please.'

'Gimmy a pint of 'arf-an-'arf, a habernethy biscuit, an'

a slice of cheese,' requested the gent.

'Very good, sir,' was the prompt reply.

'Nonsense, fellow,' persisted Mr Fledger to the potman, bristling up with an effort and returning to the attack, after the 'customer' had shoved him aside. 'What do you take me for? I'm no beggar. I have business with the secretary of the club; read that,' and he pulled Huckaback's letter out of his breast pocket, and spread it open, under the potman's nose.

The dandyprat looked it over.

'Oh! ah,' was his reply, 'they want another chap to muck about for 'em; they kicked the last one out o' the 'ouse for 'is impudence; then he went over to the "Marquis of Rumford" and got as drunk as blazes, and was kicked out again. And you're to be the new man, are yer? Well you'd better mind yer p's and q's or they'll do the same by you. Come along, I'll show yer the way round to 'em,' and he hustled poor Fledger down a crooked passage behind the bar, and into a blind ante-room that was dimly lighted with a pip of gas and furnished with a couple of hard seats and a strip of cocoanut matting.

'That's the parlour, look,' whispered the potman, laying

THE 'FORTY WINKS CLUB'

a hand on Fledger's shoulder and pointing through a curtained doorway at the end of the little chamber. 'You'll find 'em in there, all the lot. They've only just 'ad their dinners, and I wouldn't advise yer to disturb 'em, yet awhile. Sed down on one o' them seats an' wait'; and the uncourteous cicerone took himself off.

Mr Fledger, hat in hand, sank into a chair and meekly waited, waited and waited. He could see nothing but the gas-jet, so he listened for something; an exercise that gave him no strain, for unruly sounds came in to him from the tap-room, and his ears very soon were saluted in addition, by a multiplicity of greasy gruntings from the big parlour, like a drove of fat pigs round a feeding trough; by which our hero correctly divined that his prospective masters were taking their forty and more post-prandial winks. So he waited and waited.

Losing his patience at length, he tip-toed to the curtains, and parting them ever such a little, peeped between. Here

is a presentment of what he gazed upon.

Twelve elbow-chairs, circled unorderly about a massive dining-table, with twelve diverse old buffers snoozing and snoring therein, and twelve big, brown spittoons, to match, squatted between their sprawling feet, on the speckled and ruckled brown carpet. Charming were the postures, pleasing the variety, exquisite the repose.

At the bottom of the table, however, sat a non-self-indulgent sir, of a different stamp,—upright, wideawake, and making a rapid sketch on a writing-pad of one of the slumberers, while his pale, intelligent face was alight with

sardonical smiles.

The table had been cleared of the dinner-things; bottles and glasses had been set out, with a few plates of nuts, canisters of tobacco, long, clay pipes, and a strew of news-

papers and magazines.

A huge sideboard at the farther end of the room, was provided with a generous assortment of creature-comforts, partly solid, mostly liquid, to meet the sporadic attacks of the awakened 'Winkers' later in the evening, while the dogs and the huntsmen, and the jockeys on the walls, displayed their time-honoured activities under the light from a squabby chandelier, that clawed like a crab at the low, varnished ceiling.

Mr Fiedger had not counted upon finding anyone on the alert in the midst of such prevalent stupor, so before he was aware of it, his peeping was detected by the busy gentleman at the bottom of the table, who, arising, came noiselessly out to him, pulled the curtains close, lifted the chairs to the farthest corner, and, bidding our Fledge to be seated, took the opposite chair, and scrutinised him over with much attention.

'Who are you, sir?' at length he asked, 'and what is your business here? Pray, let your replies be as hushed as possible, so as not to awaken my friends in the other room.'

'I—er—my name is Filcher, sir, and I have come in response to an advertisement by your club,' stammered the uncomfortable Frederick. 'Are you Mr Huckaback?'

'No, sir, I am not. Mr Huckaback, with the rest of the company, is at present enjoying his repose. My name is Danbie, and I don't belong to this club, though I am often present, by virtue of a standing invitation. However, I am sufficiently well acquainted with its affairs. Are you the man they have sent for—to be their doorkeeper and factotum, as the president calls it?'

'Yes, Mr Danbie, and what are my duties to be? What do they mean, sir, by wanting me to reply intelligently when

spoken to upon ordinary topics?'

Danbie smiled significantly. 'I will give you a little description,' said he, 'of the "Forty Winks Club," and how it amuses itself. You will then comprehend matters clearly enough. Let me tell you, sir,' he continued, with mock gravity, 'you have happened on a very peculiar organisation. So exceptional is it, indeed, that I, who am a literary man and given to the study of social oddities, have deemed it worth while to come here very often with the purpose of reading up its members. The dominating spirits of this "Forty Winks Club" are its president, its secretary, and its treasurer. Those three gentlemen are the authors of its polity and the conservators of its rules. The club was started about six months back by those triumvirs, if I may so call them.'

'Ah, exactly so,' interjected our Romanical Fledger.

'They had for a long time been inseparable companions. Themselves, incorrigible pessimists and malcontents, they conceived the idea of gathering about them, for evening

argumentation and conviviality, a limited company, who should be just as antagonistic and hetorodox as they are. So they formulated a set of rules, had them signed by Tidd Pratt, and after a sharp inquisition, took to themselves nine others, as stiff-necked and cantankerous as they could find. Then the club was formed and this inn was chosen as its meeting place. In due course, they proceeded to business, and have been enjoying themselves ever since in their own peculiar way. Now, here is a copy of the rules and regulations, and I'll go over them so that you may gain an idea of what the "Forty Winks Club" purports to be,' and he drew a paper out of his pocket and read to the attentive Filcher the following remarkable code, which he assured him, to begin with, was most rigidly and strictly enforced:—

RULES AND REGULATIONS OF THE 'FORTY WINKS CLUB.'

PREAMBLE.

To all whom it may concern:—Take notice, that this club is compounded for the mutual consideration of vexed questions and for argument upon current topics—thus, for the rational benefit and personal satisfaction of its members—and for no other purpose whatever.

Rules.

1. The members of this club shall be twelve in number, and shall belong to no other society or organisation.

2. Widowers or bachelors only are admissible to this club, and they must be fifty years of age, or upwards.

Note.—It is held that a married man's opinions are more or less perverted by his wife, and this club declines to be treated to a rehearsal of any woman's philosophy, or to waste its time in reviewing the same. It also maintains that a man does not come to his senses before the age of fifty.

3. Every member must be of independent means and must not be engaged in any business or profession.

Note.—It is maintained that only such men can have sound, well-balanced and fearless opinions.

4. Men of good health only will be eligible. Should any member become a permanent invalid he is enjoined to resign.

Note.—It is held that a sick man's opinions are distorted

and unprofitable.

5. If any member shall assume the married state, or join any other society or association he must resign at once.

Note.—For a priori reasons.

6. The subscription is two guineas weekly, and the same will be taken up every Saturday evening by the treasurer.

7. Intoxication is strictly prohibited.

- 8. All members must be smokers, as it is considered that the practice of smoking induces calmness of mind and good
- 9. The members of this club shall dine together each evening, excepting Sundays, at the hour of 7 p.m. in the large parlour of the 'Wheatsheaf Inn,' Hampstead Hill, and everyone is enjoined to be punctual in his attendance and to conform to the 10th regulation, now and herein laid down—to take a nap of one hour's duration after the meal.

For it is firmly held that the habit of sleeping after dinner promotes good digestion and ensures equanimity, and that a man is never so able to think clearly and to speak profitably as when he has had an adequate rest after a substantial repast. Wherefore, this association is named the 'Forty Winks Club,' and its nightly siesta is to be regarded as a sine quâ non.

N.B.—A copy of these rules shall be framed and hung

up in the club-room.

'My own connection with the club remains to be explained,' continued Danbie, as he pocketed the paper, 'because I am in no sense—a "Winker." I belong to a literary society in town, am wanting several years of fifty, am lately married and am engaged in a profession which is my sole dependence. It happened, however, that a friend of mine became a member, and he favoured me from time to time with a summary of its proceedings, and told me how delightfully inharmonious the meetings were. Yet a subject was sometimes broached, about which there would be little disagreement, and when this occurred, although it was but

seldom, the members were all disappointed at the tameness of the evening's proceedings. After this had happened several times, the need was felt for someone to be present who would combat the general concensus, whatever it might be. Such an individual proved difficult to fasten upon, and my old friend asked me if I would come and assume the rôle, and seeing a new opening for my favourite studies, I consented, was invited, and accordingly came.

'I have enjoyed these meetings immensely, and it has come to be—that I am expected to gainsay the "Winkers" in everything, both individually and en masse, which, as a rule, I can very conscientiously do, though sometimes, when they tackle me all together, like a pack of wolves, I find it difficult to hold my own. Indeed, I suspect, as they see it, I never do, for these eccentrics are neither fools nor fogies, and assail me with such downright literality and often with such a formidable array of facts, that I occasionally find myself uncomfortably at odds with my own judgment, in the contest.

'As for yourself, should you be treated like the man who was here before you, I can promise you some lively experiences; although the badgering that fellow got was, some of it, due to his own behaviour, for he was a brute who could be fawning and insolent, by turns, just as the humour took him.

'The secretary will tell you that you are expected to keep out intruders, make up the fire, help the members with their overcoats, boots and slippers, hand about the stuff on the sideboard, run errands and post letters; but the chief thing these old men want you for is to be a butt for their witti-When they are too ill-tempered to bear each others' attacks, their hard language will be levelled at you. will be requested to give the company your opinions upon a matter in dispute. Then they will turn upon you and tear you all to shreds—in their own estimations. No rebuttals will be allowed you. You must listen to all they say and hold your tongue. When the fun all round begins to flag, they'll get more fun out of you. Wherefore, be prepared to stifle your sensibilities, and forget your manhood, while you hold the position of doorkeeper and factotum to the "Forty Winks Club."'

'Ah, I see, Mr Danbie,' responded the chapfallen Filcher,

'but I don't know how I'm to endure it all, if it's going to be as bad as that. I have my proper pride, sir. I'm a gentleman, Mr Danbie, though I have come down in the world, and I—' but he was cut short by a smart rapping on the table in the parlour, accompanied by a loud-spoken, masterful exhortation.

'Wake up! gentlemen, it's nine o'clock. Mr Huckaback, read the minutes.'

The snoozings instantly cease. There is a shuffling of feet, a shoving of chairs, and a clearing of throats, with spittoon accompaniments to match. The secretary rises, turns up the gas, lifts down from the mantel-shelf a great book, which he flaps open upon the table, and proceeds to 'read the minutes' in a loud and rasping voice; and while the club is filling its pipes, let us take a look at it, individually.

At the head of the table sits the president, Mr Wellesley Wightmight, in faultless evening attire. He is big-framed, upright, gaunt and grim. His shiny skull looks as hard as a billiard-ball, and is almost as smooth, though adorned at the sides with some thin curly whisps of iron-grey hair. His eyes are large and bold and keen. His long, sharp nose curves predaciously downwards to his hard-set, clean-shaven chin, in likeness to a hawk. He clutches with his talon-fingers a time-stained, ivory gavel of curious fashion; it's an image of the 'Great Mogul'—the turban set with jewels—and was once the head of a favourite walking-stick, which he broke upon the back of a coolie in Calcutta, forty years ago.

Mr Wellesley Wightmight expended the vigour of his youth in the Honourable East India Company's service, like his father, Mr Clive Wightmight, had done before him. He was born in India, and when old enough was sent home to England for a special education—going at first to Hertford Castle, and afterwards to the company's brand-new college at Haileybury. His training completed, he went back to India and dropped into the place that was awaiting him there. Subsequently, by a kind fortuity, followed by much sharp practice, he amassed a considerable fortune. He married an English lady in Calcutta, but she died within a year or two, leaving him an increment of wealth, but without issue. Then Mr Wightmight came home to England and stayed here—full of the conviction, which he ofttimes expresses, that it is 'the only place fit for a gentleman to live

in,' and live like a gentleman he accordingly did, 'cutting it fat.' He denied himself nothing that money could reachhouses and lands, horses and hounds, boon-companions, wine and women. But his grasping spirit goaded him into a certain shady speculation on the west coast of Africa. which brought him only ruinous disaster and left him with little to fall back upon but his 'paltry pension.' So he providently weaned himself of his long indiscretions, sent all his dear friends 'to the right about,' and coming up to London, has since buried himself in the rigours of a lonesome parsimony, becoming more and more cynical every day. By habit and by instinct he is domineering and mordacious still, although it is now only left him—to splinter his teeth on the dry bones of misanthropy and to 'rule the roast' with rigour in the 'Forty Winks Club,'-and this must suffice him for the remainder of his days, parched old husk that he is of seventy-three.

Seated at the president's left is Mr Dibson Clinch, the treasurer. He is a compact little man of a rounded mould, with snappy black eyes, and a snappish countenance. His tight little head is neatly enveloped in a sheath of black hair that is glinted with grey, and he wears a black signet ring on his little finger, in memory of his dead wife. He is, indeed, a very raven for glossy blackness. His close buttoned, black coat enwraps the bosom of his shirt, and his black satin cravat, coming down to meet it, is embellished in the centre with a modest gold breast-pin, which is black-headed.

Mr Dibson Clinch is a retired silversmith and—er—pawn-broker; erstwhile and for many years of Peascod Street, Windsor, where he was 'bred and born,' and he is prim, trim and punctilious, as befitting a burgess of the royal borough. His sons and daughters are all married 'out of hand.' By repute he is wealthy, and in practice, tight-fisted, and, when he dies—if he ever should—his tender offspring will doubtless endeavour to allay the poignancy of their grief with the justly apportioned lenitives he will have meted out to them. Although Mr Clinch has been out of business many a long day, he keeps a 'day-book' still, and enters therein every particular of his current expenditure; and should any of his children, upon their short visits, find him poring over that book, and should put up a plea for paternal favours, he tells them that, while they are young, they must

expect to work hard for their livings, as he had to do. They mustn't be bothering him; they must have patience, and all will be theirs, in good time. He sends them and their little ones a Christmas box each, every year, accompanied by suitable expressions of his fatherly and grandfatherly solicitudes. Things useful and inexpensive these presents always are; but the gratitude he gets in return is strangely unheedful of his golden words, and perversely commensurate with the value of his gifts in tangible coin of the realm.

Dibson Clinch, at sixty-two, is hale and tough and hearty, and bids fair to live long enough for every one of his elderly, hope-deferred, heartsick progeny, their married children, and their children as well, to go down on their marrow-bones, and to pray—and to pray—for the happy translation of their daddy-grand-daddy-great-granddad to a

deathless and far-away, bountiful sphere.

Captain Roland Helmsley—bluff and ruddy—is the next we notice as we glance along the table. He is a short-necked, fleshy old fellow. His rugged face is seamed and scarred like a rocky cliff on a western shore; and his short-cropped hair and flowing beard are of a yellowish whiteness. He has planted one of his huge brown paws upon the table, and it would make two of any other gentleman's hand in the room. He is not a man of niceties, this captain; but he possesses a couple of tempers, of which the club is fully apprised—a very good and an exceedingly bad one; and both are as prevalent as they can very well be. His harangues have but a single phase—the breezy swagger of the salt water.

'Odds, bobs! hammer and tongs, Long as I've been to sea, I've fought against every odds, And I've gained the victory.'

That's the style for him.

If you should tell him anything—no matter how true it may be—which has not the consent of his narrow understanding, why, he'll 'up and call you a liar,' with as bold a face as any man in the kingdom, and I wouldn't advise you to resent it. Although he is seventy-six, his old red rag has lost little of its bouncing muscularity, as it wags and wags behind those tobacco-stained teeth. His 'yarns' would reach from Gravesend to Hong-Kong, and the wondrously horrible

tales he will tell you of his encounters with the pirates; of mutinies, shipwrecks, and so forth, would make 'each particular hair of your head stand at end like quills on the fretful porcupine.' Many thanks to our dear friend S.

Helmsley was, for many years, a merchant skipper, sailing his own little vessel to the Gold Coast. He married, when quite young, a lady who had the 'fatal gift of beauty.' Leaving his wife at home, he went beating about the watery world—making good barter. When he came back—but let me explain. You see, Captain Helmsley was never a 'lady's man,' nor was he in the least good looking; and he may have presumed too much upon the virtue of his moneybags—nicely-filled ones though they were—that his father had left him.

Well, when he did come back, there was a sort of 'Enoch Arden' affair; some of the twang, but none of the poetry; no moralising, understand; no plantigrading on all fours, to take a last peep at his perfidio through the window; no grovelling; no anguish; and very few regrets. Those are the facts, and they play the devil with the story. So he simply took himself off to sea again, as soon as he could—after a good long drunk—and went knocking up and down the world, year after year, free of all constraints, enjoying the life of a sailor; and we needn't be too inquisitive as to what that life really is.

The captain is not burdened with relatives, but he has nephews and nieces whom he somewhat affects, and they are all on the steady look out for his money. When he has gone to his last account—they'll be disappointed, for it is not nearly so considerable as they believe it to be. The old skipper has been a high-liver and a free-spender all his life, and is of the same habits still, with only such abatements as are made imperative by his advancing years.

I need scareely tell you that Captain Roland Helmsley has a very scandalous conception of women, and per contra, that the women—those who know him—have an exceedingly disparaging opinion of him.

Close beside this old salt, in stately erectness, sits a high-shouldered gentleman, whose name is Kerfew Clitheroe. He is entitled 'Lord Clitheroe' by the sardonic president—his dignity is so superb, his moralities so strict, and his manners so courtly. Kerfew Clitheroe (I wish, myself, that

I might call him something more adequate to his important bearing) has a parchment countenance, a high, square fore-nead, a tapering jowl, a pendulous, large nose, and a shaggy brow, over blank grey eyes, which are rolling very wisely. His head is adorned with a shock of frouzy black hair, that is curiously dappled with white, in consequence, he would explain to you, of past tribulations, and he gives his neck an upward twist as though he would free it from the embrace of his ear-cutting collar. His features are set in a superior

smile, wherein there is nothing genial.

For many long years, this old prelector was confidential clerk to a large concern in the city—though he lived in a mean little house in Kentish Town, that he might be out of the reach of his professional friends, with his abominable wife and her slatternly sister, of whom he was thoroughly ashamed. These women had become utter yahoos, through their inordinate lust for liquor. Every day while Clitheroe was in the city, they got cosily drunk on the repeated fetchings of the servant-girl from a corner 'pub.' When he came home at night he would find them drivelling together on the sofa, or sunk upon the floor, insensate. Entreaties, reproaches, commands, were of no avail, for he was consorting with swine. He withheld the 'wherewithal,' but they fuddled just the same upon his credit. He refused to pay the publican, when that worthy called upon him one evening, with a very long score of the family lush. In fact, he drove him out of the house with much loud speaking and with circumstance of great indignity. So the publican beat him up in Gracechurch Street, and the beleaguered Clitheroe was constrained to make explanation of his domestic troubles to his superiors. Now, that was a very bitter pill for Kerfew; so he hied him home to Kentish Town, kicked the servant out of doors, and packed off his wife and sister in a cab to distant parts, with the promise of a solatium weekly—to keep them from brewing more mischief. Mrs Clitheroe died in the madhouse soon afterwards, and her sister followed suit by taking an overdose of laudanum. Kerfew was free at last, after twenty years of untold miseries and mortifications.

His father recently dying left him a small property; so he gave up his position and removed to that parent's shabby old villa at Downshire Hill; and is living therein, the life of a

recluse, reading up the old philosophers; although he sometimes rambles about Hampstead Heath, or, with a book under his armpit and his hands locked behind him, goes up to the terrace in front of 'Jack Straw's Castle,' and gazes absently about him—at the donkey races, at the 'merry-go-rounds,' and the junketers and hucksters in the 'vale of health.'

This proud, poor gentleman is a born preacher and dissenfer, though he never wore 'the cloth,' and has never entered a chapel in his life; and it matters not what theme is under discussion at the 'Winkers,' nor howsoever impeccable the opinions expressed, or the conclusions reached, Kerfew cavils at everything from first to last, and preaches his impossibles to the whole company.

Next to this councillor sits a funny old codger with a scarlet physiognomy and pale blue eyes, by the name of Michael Dowd. (They call him 'Micky Rumpus,' at the instance of the president.) He has a warm heart and a fiery head, and the other 'Winkers' get some good fun out of

him, when they feel so disposed.

Tipperary was Michael's birthplace, and he came over to England, a fatherless lad, showing the stuff he was made of on the way by getting into a scrimmage with another young gentleman, also from Tipperary, concerning the favours of a black-eyed jade from Cork, who was a passenger by the same boat. In their heedless fury, they tumbled each other over the rail into the Irish Channel. Mike's antagonist was drowned, and Michael himself was only rescued at the last gasp. This narrow escape from a watery grave, and the tragic fate of his rival, imbued young Dowd with a life-long terror of the sea.

Michael, in England, served in a variety of humble capacities, in various places, keeping his 'weather eye' open, and saving all that he could. One fine day his fortune took a turn, and he found himself, by a deal that was more creditable to his wits than to his honour, the proprietor of some baths and washhouses at Brixton. They brought him in a good income, and he kept them in full swing for many years. When, recently, he sold the property, he found he had enough money to live upon comfortably for the rest of his days.

Mr Dowd had several sons and daughters, all of whom, when they grew up, emigrated to the United States, where,

being of a nationality which is rampant in that country, they all prospered remarkably well. The daughter—a buxom wench of twenty—after some lively experiences in 'Gotham,' disposed of her taking feminality at a fancy figure, to a mining-man from a place they call 'Howling Mob,' 'somewheres out West.' Her husband has 'lots o' money.' The sons went in for politics; and being strong-headed, cunning, impudent and unscrupulous, they came to the front 'in

great style.'

Last summer, Mrs Dowd took a notion to visit her children in America, though she could by no means prevail upon her 'old man' to accompany her; in fact, he tried to dissuade her from going, as she was ailing at the time; but all to no purpose, for she wanted to know the sensations of a traveller. Well, she was 'that sick and ill aboard ship, they all thought she'd 'a died'; and after she had spent a few torrid weeks in New York, she ceased very suddenly to 'ail' any longer, departing for a 'bourne whence no traveller ever returns.' Her 'bys' gave her 'wan av the prattiest funerals as ud iver been seen in the counthry,' and wrote home to their father, giving him the full particulars of it. 'A jewel of a woman' was Mrs Dowd, although perhaps—a trifle headstrong. Michael was left a tearful widower at the age of sixty-two.

Mr Dan Shem Abrams is next on the list. 'Damn Sham Abrams' his meracious associates call him, by reason of the 'damn bad headaches' he so often pretends to be suffering from, as an excuse for saying very little when called upon to speak. Mr Abrams has a shoulderless, neckless, porcine figure; a black, curly-wigged head; a vulture-beak, and plenty of it; cunning, dark eyes; a sensuous mouth, and a leathery complexion. He is a Jewish gentleman, you see, but not of the 'Jewish persuasion'; of no persuasion, in fact, which doesn't chime in with his interests. Ostensibly, he is 'out of business'; but with a hand deep in the stock-market, and his sons operating a large tailoring concern in the city with their father's funds, it would be hard to explain how that can be. Daniel has been a widower for many years, although by no means a sorrowful one; and with his eye focused upon the 'main chance,' and his heart set upon money-making, he must yet have a freaky seam of humour in his composition, Semitic though it be, or he would never spend his evenings at the 'Forty Winks Club.'

At the bottom of the table, in military isolation, sits Colonel Plumpton Staggers, his arm thrown over the back of Danbie's vacant chair. He is cramming some strong tobacco into the bowl of his huge meerchaum pipe. He is a fierce-looking old warrior, who has seen many years of active service with 'John Company.' According to his own accounts, he has been in every important action, from the Sikh War to the Indian Mutiny. He was a captain in the 'Bengal Light Cavalry,' and was breveted a colonel, when he 'transferred' to Her Majesty's Army after the rebellion. Plumpton is a soldier to the marrow—knows it well, and never forgets it; but he might also bear in mind that he is very little else. His hard white crown has some wellcombed hairs flattened across it, from a point above his ear, where his parting used to be. A pair of grizzly whiskers spread out immensely from his brick-brown, battle-scarred visage, and a white, magnificent moustache, dyed saffron at the ends with copious 'smokes' of 'Negro Head,' gushes from his bony, great nose and flows over his mouth, casting a dark shadow upon his prominent chin. This evening he is in 'undress,' for he has turned over the lapels of his blue frock-coat and buttoned them loosely, top and bottom, so as to give it something of the grace of a fatigue tunic. But you should see him upon occasions of ceremony. when all the 'Winkers' don their best—whie-u-uw! he comes down to the club in a hansom cab, dressed in the full regimentals of his favourites, the Bengal Light Cavalry—a sky-blue jacket embroidered with silver; bullion bword-belt, dangling sabretash, boots and spurs, a brown bearskin shako jauntily cocked upon his ferocious old head, with aigret aloft and cords and tags dependent. A long, grey cloak is thrown loosely over his shoulders, to veil his splendours from the gazers around the 'Wheatsheaf,' and as he throws that cloak over his arm and clanks and jingles across the 'parlour' to his seat at the bottom of the table, while President Wightmight is dropping into his at the head of it, a question would arise with the uninitiated, as to which of those giants twain—was really master of the ceremonies.

¹A colloquial term for the Honourable East India Company, in apposition to John Bull.

Colonel Plumpton Staggers, in all his gallant career, has never ventured into the dangers of matrimony (some of the soldiers like some of the sailors are wretched cravens in that respect). He was retired from the army years ago, and has nothing but his half-pay now to live upon and nobody to please but himself; and I opine this is just as it should be, for our erstwhile dashing cavalry officer has become an irritable, stammering, deaf old brute, who cares not a dot for anybody. He will be eighty years of age come the eighteenth of June, a day which he would proudly remind you—will also be the anniversary of Waterloo, and he would prove to you therefrom that he was born to be a hero, and a conquering one, at that.

The next 'Winker' we observe is Dr Spawlding M'Spavin, called 'The Snorter,' his breath is so stertorous and his voice so choky. Although this party is irreproachably dressed, he is not pleasant to look upon, for he is shapeless and plethoric. He has oblique little eyes, a tumified nose, blubbery lips and a ponderous jaw, which is mantled with a sheen of whitey-brown bristles. His neck is red

and pustulous, like his ring-bedecked hands.

M'Spavin was a veterinary surgeon in his younger days, and has long been an authority on horses. Of late years he has bartered the animal, in all its variety, from 'knackers' to 'thoroughbreds,' with good success, being up to every dodge in the shifty business. His domestic life has not been reputable. Wife he has none, and was very careful never to have, though there are several young whipsters who should own his name. Only a few years back, Dr Spawlding M'Spavin would have been altogether impossible in the 'Forty Winks Club,' comprehensive though it be; but his rancid ferments since then, have subsided, so that, under ordinary conditions, he can be suffered to sit with decent people. Yet even now, with his 'countrygentleman' airs, his spotless linen, his broadcloth and kid gloves, his dandy 'dogcart' and 'tiger,' his high-stepping bit of blood, with his balance at the bank and his smart little 'box' on the Cricklewood Road, he is hardly more than a caput mortuum of exhausted appetites and unsavoury recollections, the which he endeavours to conceal under a longfaced interest in social questions.

After he has been imbibing too freely at the club, a thing

that happens more often than is seemly, he shakes off the snaffle and belches forth, in all his native beastliness; whereupon Enos Huckaback jumps up and catches him in a table-cloth, head and shoulders, stifles his blasphemies with a vigorous twist, and bundles him out of the 'parlour,' and by my faith, when he finds himself on the wrong side of the door, his language and his conduct are bad in the extreme. The King of Terrors will come and claim Spawlding

The King of Terrors will come and claim Spawlding M'Spavin sooner than he imagines, for though he is not very old, is apparently quite strong and takes 'mighty good care of himself,' yet the sins of his manhood have found him out, and it is the president's opinion, quite freely expressed,

that he'll go off one day 'like a rotten sheep.'

An elderly person, by the name of Hugh Dover, sits next, along the table. Wightmight, who delights in nicknames and paraphrases, under cover of which he aims a stinging sarcasm, has dubbed this man 'You Duffer,' presuming upon his faulty education and slow perceptions; yet he has played his game too knowingly through life for the epithet of 'duffer' to be applicable to him. His frouzy old head gives token of great pertinacity, and his deep-set eyes look shrewdly out from under shaggy brows. Although Mr Dover served his time as a carpenter, he took to photography, when quite a young man, and made a good thing of it. His portraiture was of the 'soot and whitewash kind,' which included a touting henchman at the door, to shove a sample 'picture' under the nose of each passer-by.

Dover's 'studio' was located in the City Road, near to the erstwhile notorious 'Eagle,' and a phalanx of his 'cartesde-visites, at two-and-six per dozen,' displayed in a gigantic frame, masked the yard in front of his establishment. Over his doorway appeared this distich, which he made as visible

by night as it was by day,—

'Of those in life—you love and cherish, Secure the shadow—ere the substance perish.'

Should you step into Mr Dover's 'reception-room,' to test the excellence of his shadowography, he would shuffle out to meet you, in carpet-slippers, dirty shirt-sleeves and greasy smoking-cap, with a short pipe in his mouth and his hands jingling the silver in his trousers pockets. Greetings, 'posings,' 'manipulations' and a 'negative,' which he would

assure you, upon frowning inspection, 'couldn't be better,' would follow in rapid succession. Then he would take your money, tell you when to call for your 'pictures,' and pack you off about your business with a celerity as imperative as it was admirable; for all day long, Sundays

included, his sitters came up by the shoal.

Ah, they were the 'Black Art's' piping times; when the money rolled in, hand over fist, and any sort of rubbish could be palmed off upon the public. A few years of this sort of thing made Mr Dover rich, although, as he would often remark, 'he had to work like a slave,' and especially had those he was constrained to employ. But when a rival 'artist' opened a 'studio' beside him and took 'clearer' pictures and offered all his patrons a glass of gin at the door, our friend was disgruntled and sold off his business. Now he owns a 'lot of little houses' in Whitechapel, and they bring him a big rental every week.

Hugh Dover is a widower and lives with his married daughter. Having nothing to do but to amuse himself, and not being gifted with natural resources, he has lately taken a fancy for cultivating 'opinions' and apeing the connoisseur, though his chances for culture are regrettably meagre, and

his first few advances deplorably crude.

Udolfo Dillwater, Esquire, is the next gentleman who bespeaks our attention. They call him 'Lofty Bayswater,' as a skit upon his 'West-End connexions' and magnificent deportment. He is a handsome old fellow, with a pointed face, pearly white hair and a silvery beard. He wears a monocle at his eye and is gazing round at his associates with pleasant nonchalance. His clothes fit him nicely, but are old-fashioned and threadbare, and his linen looks sallow for want of a change. For all his high-mightiness, Dillwater, Esquire, has not been a success. He was his mother's only son, and once the darling of her vainglorious heart.

By the time he was twenty, he could dress very elegantly, dance very charmingly, play the flute and the fiddle, I beg his pardon, the violin, and dabble in water-colours. He squandered her small income with his patrician habits and boasted to his friends of his 'West-End connexions.' Ah! but wasn't he a don in those days, with his elegant figure and his fashionable attire,—blue frock-coat with tight sleeves and peaked velvet collar, prick-eared 'castor' and lilac silk waist-

coat, with drab 'doeskin' trousers strapped down to his patent-leather shoes. And think of his nut-brown curls, his pink and white face, languishing eyes and transparent, aquiline, miniature nose. The girls all petted him, yet he was too much enraptured with his darling self to fall in love with any of them. But a hare-brained little creature ravened him exceedingly and gave him no peace till he secretly married her. Alas! and alas! she was so far, far beneath him in the social scale. His proud old mother had intended her hyperion for an heiress, and this miserable exploit filled her with rage and mortification. She drove the young miscreants off to America to get them safely away from her 'West-End connexions.'

Udolfo taught fiddling in the 'Land of the Free,' sometimes dancing and painting too, with the poorest success, and his lady and he had to subsist very chiefly on remittances from home. Necessitous years drew their courses along, with many a sharp vicissitude, but they still found Dillwater drawing upon his mother's purse. He was making experiment of many callings, but keeping to none of

them long together.

Sons and daughter were born to him, grew up around him, sought other 'connexions' and drifted away. moved out 'West' to try the life of a 'granger,' but he hated hard work and knew nothing of farming. Disasters quickly followed, culminating in the death of his devoted wife. She had all along been the better man of the two. Now she was gone, he was irretrievably beaten. So he packed up his clothes and went back to his mother, in no sense humbled by his laches in life. But his mother was now aged, and he had spent the most of her money, so he tried piping and painting and fiddling again,—barely making a livelihood. It was years ago and the poor lady is dead, and Udolfo is living entirely upon what little she left him, though he contrives to 'make up' as a gentleman still, and often reverts to his 'West-End connexions.' All his life long he has toyed with the tasks at which other men work. He will sink to his rest in a halo of idleness. Nothing could have suited Dillwater better than to belong to the 'Forty Winks Club,' and he snapped at the opportunity the moment it was offered him, though he pinches himself to the bone to pay the subscriptions.

At the top corner of the table, erect and precise, sits Mr Hardiwood Bent, a retired master clockmaker. He is dark complexioned, good looking, brusque and seventy. Mr Bent went bald when he was quite a young man, so he always wears a wig, and its jetty black kinks but ill accord with his streaming white whiskers. When Mr Bent gave up business, some fifteen years ago, he built a villa in the Gospel Oak Fields and thither retreated with his wife and He devoted himself to gardening and to the invention of queer devices and mechanisms about the house. He constructed a hutch for his daughter's guinea-pigs which cleansed itself thoroughly every day, to the satisfaction of all concerned, excepting the pigs, which were tossed about most amazingly whilst the cleansing was in process. He made a clepsydra too, which he fastened up over the parlour mantelpiece, and a locomotive cruet stand which, being 'wound up,' perambulated about amidst the plates and dishes, though it had to be snatched off the table directly it got into mischief, which it quickly did.

Numerous shelves, brackets, rackets and traps did he also elaborate for the household benefit, although these complaisances hindered him not from being a martinet. He insisted on taking his breakfast at six o'clock, summer and winter, and if the folks didn't send up his shaving water the instant he shouted for it, he would fling his boot-jack downstairs against the kitchen door with a rousing vehemence permitting no further delay.

After a while they had a pretty little place together, at Gospel Oak, embowered with trees and gay with garden flowers, but Mrs Bent took sick and died, and the daughter insisted upon going back to town. The old gentleman sorrowfully acquiesced, gave up all his tinkering, innocent life, and resigned himself to live with his Carrie in furnished apartments.

Now she is married and he is alone, for he refuses to accept a home with any of his married children. The 'Forty Winks Club' was just the thing for him, and he joined it without parley or hesitation. He lately made a present to the club of his locomotive cruet stand, but when upon experiment, that erratic contrivance upset a decanter of wine into the president's lap, overturned the salt into Captain Helmsley's plate and emptied the mustard pot down the sleeve of Colonel Plumpton Staggers, it was all but

unanimously voted a failure, and banished from the festive board, although President Wightmight hung it up afterwards to the chandelier over the table, ostensibly to sweeten the donor's feelings. There it dangles now, at the end of a scarlet blind cord, in the swirl and vortex of every hot discussion. Still, Hardiwood Bent is appeased, for he sees not the humour of it.

We now come round to the head of the table again, and to the secretary, Enos Huckaback, who is reading the minutes.

This functionary is the youngest and staunchest of all the 'Winkers,' also the ugliest. He has a stumpy, thick body, and his short, thick head which is set upon a short, thick neck, is densely matted with a bristly crop of short black hair, which comes down all round his brow and in front of his outspread, monstrous ears. He reminds you of a wild boar with those fleshy seams across his low forehead, that shaggy black penthouse over his piercing, yellow-brown eyes, and that long, coarse snout, with round, open nostrils, which are puckered up at the angles with a most offensive sneer. His lips are heavy and firm-set, and his clean-shaven, blue-black jaw lacks nothing in force or determination. Not so very long ago this gentleman was a sculptor of monuments and gravestones, practising his handicraft in a mason's yard off Highgate Rise, within sound of the cemetery bell.

Now, whether the multiplied, joyless years of his avocation and the melancholy scenes and circumstances with which it ofttimes connected him, proved too greatly depressing to his sensitive nature, or whether, which is fully as probable, he had made enough money to relinquish his dismal calling for something more profitable, I am unable to say, but he gave it up and blossomed out as a speculating builder.

The Gospel Oak Fields at that time were speckled over with cheap, new 'suburban residences.' At intervals you would be confronted with a big, white-lettered board, hoisted upon posts which gave you pertinent information in the following style:—

'THIS ELIGIBLE LAND TO BE LET ON BUILDING LEASES. TERMS 99 YEARS.

For particulars, apply to Messrs HAGGLE & DICKER,
Estate Agents and Auctioneers,
Moorgate St., City.

It was a cheerless neighbourhood, abounding with brickfields, rubbish-heaps, muddy ponds, stagnant ditches, and pollard-willows, although the wooded heights of Hampstead and Highgate 'lent enchantment' to the northern view.

In this locality did our Enos run up a row of 'elegant semidetached villas' which soon let or sold for all they were worth, for London was expanding inexorably on every side, and our friend, after some years of painful disbursements, found himself the recipient of a handsome income.

Enos had an invalid wife who is now dead, and his children are all married, with the exception of a hump-backed son who is subject to epileptic fits, and lives at home

with his parent in their showy villa.

Huckaback has always been a free liver, and although he doesn't of himself, care for any of the ladies in a way that would impel him to marry one of them, yet bearing in mind his comfortable circumstances and his accessible singleness, it is safe to say that some woman of nerve and experience will set a trap for him successfully, sooner or later, though, when she does, she'll find she's caught a 'tartar.'

This ill-favoured recorder, however, has finished reading his minutes, and they tell of a furious controversy amongst the 'Winkers' the night before, upon the decision just rendered in the 'Tichborne case,' and I may remark that all the old argufiers in the United Kingdom had been alignant with them. Those minutes are now put to the meeting and signed by the president nem. con., and there ensues a general shake-up all round; chairs are dragged to the table, pipes lit, throats cleared and noses blown, while everybody looks at the president, who, eyeglass in hand, is turning over the leaves of a magazine.

Danbie, in the ante-room, has been awaiting this opportunity to give entrance to Fledger and get back to his seat, so with a beck of the finger he pushes aside the curtain and steps into the parlour, Fledger toeing it close behind him. Wideawake Wightmight sees them on the instant

and exclaims to the company as he faces about,—

'Why, by all the gods! here comes our Apollo with a satyr at his heels.' Every eye is turned upon them in a moment.

'There's the secretary,' says Danbie to Fledger, pointing over the table to Huckaback, as he takes his seat.

Poor Fledger stomps bravely across the room 'Good-

evening, Mr Huckaback, says he, 'I am the gentle-er-

m-man-you have engaged as a waiter.'

'Oh! are yer now?' snarls the secretary, pushing back his chair. 'You're the gentleman we've engaged as a waiter. Well, step up this way, Mr Gentleman, will yer? and show yer shanks. They make such a row, I want to take a look at 'em.' Our Frederick shakily complies.

'Shanks, eh?' bellows M'Spavin, 'marrow-bones I call

'em.'

'Why, what an odd fish it is,' remarks Dibson Clinch; 'look at his flowing locks and just look at his nose; look at his mouth too; in fact, look at him all over, I'll be dodwolloped if ever I saw such a figure of fun in all my life,'

'Will the shentleman be good enough to tell us what is his trade?' sleekly inquires the Jew.

'Trade,' says the captain, 'that fellow never had a trade,

I'll swear; can't you see he's a damn sham?'

'Order there, sir. Order!' shouts the president, ironically rapping the table with his gavel, 'no personalities, please.' A grin goes round the table. Then several 'Winkers' volunteer a guess as to Fledger's occupation.

'He looks like a broken-down conjurer,' remarks one.

'More like a quack doctor,' says another.
'An undertaker, out of luck,' adds a third.

'No, no, he's been a Methody preacher,' cry out two

others simultaneously.

'Not pious looking enough for that, gentlemen,' interposes the president, as with keen, analytical frown he scrutinises poor Fledger through his eyeglasses from top to toe, and addresses him with pointed irony. 'You've been a teacher of nice little ragged boys and girls at a workhouse school in the country, haven't you, my man?'

This shaft of Wightmight's so nearly hits the mark that Horatio's limbs gave way under the shock, and he falls backwards amongst some glasses and bottles on a 'dumb waiter' behind him; then, in a hurry to retrieve himself, he stumbles over the president's spittoon, gets a kick on the shins for his 'awkwardness' and twisting half-way round, plumps down backwards on to the sturdy knees of Enos Huckaback who has just faced round to interrogate him.

'Zounds! man,' roars the secretary, giving Fledger a

vigorous shove in the small of the back, 'what the devil's the matter with yer?'

'The poor man seems weak,' interposes Danbie, 'give

him a drink of something.'

'Here, fellow,' growls the secretary, pouring out a glass of whisky, 'for God's sake swallow that, roll into a seat and tell us what you've been, for I swear you're the queerest

bloke I ever set eyes on.'

'Oh, never mind what he's been, Hucky,' breaks in the president, unwilling to be proved wrong in his own estimate and eager to take up the baiting. 'Listen to me, vinegarface; you forgot to send in your card, so I don't know your name, but it appears that you've been watching us at our naps, and I don't know what that fool of a waiter was about to let you, but when anybody does catch us in that way we make him do the first thing that comes into our heads. Now, I am well assured by your appearance that you are a fine baritone, so the mandate is, that you mount that sideboard and sing us a song, and you may think yourself lucky to get off so easily, for the rule is to brand eavesdroppers under the chin with a hot poker. Isn't it, Hucky?'

'Yes, that's a fact,' replies the secretary, 'and I can't see why this fellow should be made an exception,' and he

jumps up and thrusts the poker into the fire.

'But, but, gentlemen!' exclaimed poor Fledger, greatly alarmed, 'I came here by your own request, and I don't

understand, I-'

'None of your shuffling now, you stale old vinegar,' snaps the president, 'it's of no use here. Jump up at once, I tell you. Hucky, stir his stumps for him,' and Enos, nothing loth, jerks the unfortunate on to a chair, and pushing back some of the things on the sideboard, hoists him up on to the empty space, where he stands, a ludicrous object of misery and despair.

'Ha, ha, ha-h,' roar the 'Winkers.' 'He, he, he-e,'

sniggles the Jew.

'Well, sir,—begin,' interjects the president.

'Come, strike up,' shouts the colonel.

'Yes, don't carry on there like a mincing wench. Out with your chanty,' bawls the captain.

'Ha, ha, ha-h,' roars the company again.

'Gentlemen,' pleads the miserable man, 'I'm exceedingly

sorry, indeed I am, but I can't sing a stave, I never could.'

'How long is he going to stand there looking like a fool?' bellows M'Spavin.

Poor Fledger writhes in agony.

'We've waited your pleasure long enough, sir,' remarks the president. 'Touch him up with the poker, Hucky; is it nice and warm?'

'Oh, yes,' replies the secretary, plucking his weapon out of the fire and stepping up to Fledger with a great show of commencing the torture.

'Gentlemen, spare me, spare me!' screams the horrorstricken victim, dodging about on the sideboard to keep out of the way of the poker. 'I'll try and sing you something; but I can only think of one stupid little verse.'

'Out with it, then, out with it,' shouts a chorus in front of him. Poor Fledger clutches his windpipe, gulps down a lump in his throat and delivers himself, in a ridiculous quaver, of this time-honoured, artful ditty:-

> ' I once knew a maid who was terribly afraid Her sweetheart would come to her; So she ran to bed and covered up her head, And bolted the door with a skewer.'

'Bravo! Bravo!' goes up from the table.

'Splendid! by jingo,' exclaims the colonel; 'it's better

than Sims Reeves. Go it again, old man.'

'That was a song of exquisite sentiment, sir,' observes the president, 'and most touchingly rendered, as we might have expected. True, it's as old as the hills, but old songs, like old wine, are all the better for the keeping.'

'Undoubtedly they are, Mr Wightmight,' interposes Kerfew, 'and I submit this one would have been better still, had the fellow been suffered to keep it to himself.'

'Have patience, your lordship; do have patience,' be-

seeches the president.

'Well, but I say this is altogether too absurd, sir,' protests Clitheroe again. 'Be good enough, Mr Huckaback, to help that man down.'

'Yes. Oh! do pull him down,' pleads Udolfo Dillwater, 'we can't go on listening to that sort of thing.' Fledger is withing in his perth and graning as cheerily as a death's nead.

Thosan with him! Down with him!' cry out several

igerier.

So Hurikanatik hands the wretched Frederick off the subcotand, with such uncalled-for muscularity, that he tears a great slit in his respectable coat and ruckles his shirt-to-som most abominably.

"What is your name, sir?" inquires the president, as

Fledger drops into a chain.

"Fluorer is my name," mumbles the wretched man.

Well then, Pilchard, Herring, or whatever you are, now that we have proof of your excellence as a singer, give us a sample of your ab lities as a waiter. On that sideboard you will perceive various cates and cordials, with sundry equipments to deliver the serve, therefore—serve round the nectar, sir, with such ambrosial accompaniments as these divinities may be pleased to demand, and he waves his hand over the whole company.

Poor Fiedge gets up, hastily wives his mouth, and filling a long tray on the sideboard with the good things so loftily indicated, shuffles round behind the 'Winkers,' pathetic and

broken spirited, popping corks and serving dainties.

'I think, gentlemen,' says Wightmight, as he deliberately cracks a valuat, 'that our satvr here, has piped us a pitch-note for this evening's harmonies,' and he jerks back his thumb at Fiedger, who is handing a dish of caramels to the greedy Huckaback; 'therefore, if you are agreeable, the topic shall be—Women, particularly considered in their relations to Men. I know this is a matter we've discussed before, but we needn't stick to the subject too closely; what we want is a rousing, good discussion.' Then he raps sharply on the table with his 'tippoo,' as he calls it, to signify that the discussion is open (Fledger heaving a deep sigh in the corner, for it reminds him of his silver ferule), and lighting his long pipe, leans back in his chair and treats the company down the table to a hard and glistening smile, as they sit in the smoke-wreaths and twist and puff, and fidget and frown—in view of the business now imposed upon them.

Let us listen to the disputations of these queer old chips from a composite world, who, having sapped the ranker pleasures of their lives, now rail at the sources of supply.

CHAPTER XXVII

WISEACRE WISDOM

THERE was quietness round the table for a few minutes—no one seeming ready to take hold of the subject. Kerfew Clitheroe at length broke the silence, and delivered himself with much dignity as follows:—

'Gentlemen, a good deal of nonsense has been ventilated in the public prints, about the status of women, and it is frequently claimed that women are our equals, some going so far as to say that they are our superiors. Now, Mr President and gentlemen, I disagree with that opinion in toto, and contend that, admirable as the fair sex may be, especially in some instances, they are the inferior of us men, and they know it better than we do; the fact that some exceptional women are not our inferiors—only proves the rule. Thence I draw the conclusion that, whether as associates, sisters, wives or-er-anything else, they are not adequate for our complete companionship; and I assert, furthermore, that the proper companion of man—is man. He alone can reciprocate with his fellowman in the whole wide range of his being. The fact that some men do not or cannot thus reciprocate—again only proves the rule, or rather what the rule ought to be. If a man should be judged solely by his peers, it follows, I think, that he can only be completely understood and fully beloved by those who are in every sense—his equals.

'Now, when we treat with women, we contract ourselves into a smaller sphere than that which naturally belongs to us—so that we may adapt ourselves to their narrower perceptions, coming down to meet them, as it were, from the plane of our higher selves.

'This may not be apparent to the young man—who takes those things to be surpassingly good which are supremely captivating to his lower senses. But as he wears along in life, as his capacities unfold and his passions abate, he sees, or he should see, that to abide with any woman, as to the whole of his nature, is, unavoidably, to circumscribe his intellect and to stultify his moralities.'

'Ho! Ho!' exclaimed Hugh Dover, up the table, 'why

the "stultified moralities" of all the gents in the room put together, yer lordship's included, wouldn't fill this 'ere walnut shell.'

'That's an unwarrantable assumption of yours, sir?' broke in 'Lofty Dillwater.' 'I presume there are some honourable and moral gentlemen amongst us, even if you don't happen to be included with them, and I, for one, resent your impertinent remark.'

'None of your nonsense now, Mr Bayswater,' replied the

imperturbable 'Duffer,' 'you don't come over me.'

'Order there; order!' shouted the president, rapping loudly with his 'tippoo,' 'I must remind you both that every individual sitting at this table is a gentleman of unquestionable honour, chockful of "stultified moralities," or moralities that might have been stultified, and overflowing with courtesies and kindnesses to boot,' and he smiled upon the

company like a cacodemon.

'Well, that's nyther here nor there, Mr Wightmight,' interjected Captain Helmsley, 'but his lordship here,' treating Kerfew to a dig in the ribs, 'has taken the right bearings, sure enough. A man doesn't get shipway till he casts loose from his moorings among the women. I've had a blarsted long experience in my time, and I know what I'm talkin' about. I was reared amongst a parcel o' women, My mother, my two aunts on my mother's side, my grandmother on my father's side, and half a dozen sisters. Isn't that enough to judge by? My father was a-cruisin' up and down the country most o' the time, and the only brother I ever had, died when I was six years old. I kept my weather eye open, youngster as I was, so I got a good insight of women's ways. Then there was my wife; she was a clipper, taut and trim, and her female friends, too, they were all o' the same rig. Yes, I've kept tally of every one of 'em, and I tell you that barring a streak of the spoony, when they're about sixteen—"sweet sixteen," some fools call it—I've always found 'em just as selfish, two-faced and unreliable as ever they could hang in their skins,' and he gave the table a thump with his fist that set 'And I say this, I'd rather deal the glasses jingling. with the damndest leather-bellied Lascar afloat than with ninety-nine out of every hundred of 'em.'

'Why, you ranting old misanthrope, what's the matter with

you?' snarled Huckaback. 'You're worse than you were the last time we had this job on. The women are good enough in their way, aren't they, Staggers?' catching the soldier's fiery eye, and winking at him down the table. The colonel returned him a prompt, significant nod, in token

of his profound approval.

'Never mind what anybody says, captain,' interposed Spalding M'Spavin, 'you're right; but I go a step further. I contend we don't come to our senses, any of us, till we cease talkin', or even thinkin' about women at all. Why can't we elderly men see things just as they are, I should like to know? There's lots of old fools who fancy they're fond of the women, and that the women are still fond o' them. They can't see, tog themselves out as dandy as they please, that they only look old and ugly in the eyes of any woman that's worth a snap. Now why don't they look at things just as they are, and live the fag-end of their lives out in a natural way?

'I mean to say that a man with one foot in the grave, very likely, and plenty to answer for, when his time comes, ought to settle down-serious, live respectable, and let the women go to Jericho. I say let bygones be bygones, since bygones they are—and give me, for one, a good dog or a good horse before the very best woman that ever stood up in petticoats. They're not half the trouble, when they're in their flings, you can larrup 'em for it, and no one has any right to interfere; besides, they're no ways partickler about your looks nor your age, nor how much money you're going to leave behind you. Oh! now I think of it, who's comin' to the ploughin' match at Pinner to-morrow afternoon? A lot of the best county people and some top-nobs from town are goin' to be there. It's only eight miles from my crib, and I'll take any two of you over with me in my dogcart. Betsy, you know, is a stylish bit o' blood, and the fastest cob in the county, I'll warrant. A champagne lunch goes with the party, and John in his new livery'll ride behind.'

'Order, sir,' rasped the president in a burst of savage jealousy (his own straitened circumstances no longer permitting him to indulge as he formerly had, in this kind of swagger). 'Order, sir, and keep to the subject, if you please.'

'Oh' damn the subject,' retorted the horse-dealer. 'I've said toy say, and I'll say nothing more about the blarsted subject.'

'The next gentleman, snapped Wightmight, beating a

lively tattoo upon the table.

'Well. I think the women are good enough—if you keep 'em in their place,' adventured Hardiwood Bent, after a short pause, during which our Fledger had been in requisition for drinks all round.

'Oh! yes, if you keep 'em in their profer place, they are,' rejoined Hugh Dover, 'a woman, a dog and a walnut tree,

the more you bash 'em the better they be.'

By Jeve, sir, roared the colonel, who deemed it proper for him, as a soldier, to pose as a gallant, 'I've a great mind to come round and "bash" you myself, and I will, too, if you dare to say another word in that strain,' and he shook his fist across the table at Hardiwood.

Don't you gobble at me, you old turkey cock,' was the irritating rejoinder, which was followed by a blasphemous

ext losion on the part of Plumpton.

Order, there, gentlemen!... Order, I say once more! bawled Wightmight again, craning forward from the elbows of his chair. 'Knight-errantry is a pretty thing to read about, my dear colonel, and was a splendid thing to engage in, when the fiction was nursed, by you gentlemen-at-arms, that the women were angels; but it would be out of place at the present time, particularly at this festive board, where it is each man's privilege to speak of people and things precisely as he sees them, without fear or favour. It is this very practice which keeps us all from making fools of ourselves; besides,' and his voice dropped at once into a mocking accent, 'who knows but what our friend Dover was referring just now, to a kind of woman who is always capering round the edges of the bottomless pit, if she doesn't actually fall into it?' (The worthy Dover had referred to nothing of the kind, but it was a good enough pretext, the president thought, for interjecting a little of his own particular venom.)

'Very likely,' remarked Dibson Clinch. 'I would never, if I knew it, marry a woman of that kind, and God help the

man who does.'

'Yes, Clinch,' rejoined the president, 'and that's why I say—let us by all means see the truth, whether about the

women or anything else. Let us look at things just as they are—in fact, as our excellent friend the Snorter has so elegantly advised us to, for you may depend upon it, we are only babes and sucklings until we do, even if we should live to be as old as Methuselah.'

'In my opinion, sir,' spake Francis Danbie, 'that is the most delusive dogma laid down by anyone this evening; for, happening so often as it does, that people, conditions and circumstances are inimical to us, the seeing of them all as they really are—must unavoidably tend to dishearten us in our manifold encounters with the world, and to undermine our confidence in the compulsory interchanges and essential consociations which we have with our fellow-beings. No. sir, I say, let us endeavour to cast a rosy glow over everything and everybody we have to deal with, weak and illogical as it may seem, for thus shall we make headway along the difficult paths of life, and gain the fairest chances of safety in its graver emergencies; and, touching this evening's subject, I maintain that you mustn't attempt to see a woman precisely as she is, if you would realise all the happiness that is possible with her by taking her to wife. You must consent to regard her chiefly through the roseate media of your own affections. You must be "to her faults a little blind, to her virtues very kind."'

'Yes, yes, my Apollo, we know all about that,' retorted Wightmight. 'Knew it before you were born, most of us, or, at least, while you were in that callow condition which admits of no argument either way. Now this rosy gaze of yours is nothing but a purblind squint at our alderlievest. through pink spectacles, so that we may rhapsodise over her, while our mutual friends, contented, as they always are, to look at everybody's affairs but their own in a natural way, can't for their lives see anything ideal or romantic about her. I don't sneer at these delusions; they have their advantages for people in the heyday of life, cornered, for instance, in the way that you are.' (Danbie was newly married, a fact borne well in mind at the 'Winkers' Club.') 'But, my dear Danbie, I do pity our self-deception, because, when we discover at last that the wife of our bosom is not an extraordinary creature, after all, unless, indeed, she be extraordinary bad, when we see her, which we come to do much sooner than we could have given ourselves credit for, plainly

as she is, plainly as she always was . . . with abominable plainness, as she always means to be, why, we inexorably suffer a most deplorable collapse and our high-strung ecstasies melt away to empty foolishness. Ah, my Apollo! 'tis sad, but true, as you will find out for yourself some day.'

Danbie bit his lip, but reserved his reply.

'Talking of seeing things as they are,' remarked Dibson Clinch, 'I remember getting myself into the wrong box once, through that sort of thing, or rather because I didn't hold my tongue about it. I was going to give away a young lady at the altar. She was the daughter of an old friend of mine, who died many years ago. She was a pretty girl, and had been well educated. She used to stay at our place, on and off, half her time, and I felt like a father to her; in fact, she had such winning ways—we all liked her, and she was so pretty and modest that we made certain she'd marry some handsome and good young man, and several likely chaps were nibbling at her. Well, she took it in her head to marry a man old enough to be her father, as big as a bullock and as ugly as sin, though I will say, he doted on her like a boy, and had plenty of the rino. We all felt vexed and disappointed, and I was much annoyed when she asked me to be her "papa" on the happy occasion. I couldn't refuse, but I felt very sore; so when the day came, and I was having a confidential chat with her in the parlour. waiting for the carriages, I spoke my mind to her. "My dear," said I, "I don't believe you love the man you're a-going to marry. He's all right, of course, but he's no match for you, Clara." "Indeed, pa" (she always called me pa), "you mustn't speak of Mr Blandy in that way; he's a very nice gentleman, and his love is very precious to me." "My dear, it may be so," I told her, "but you don't love him, for all that." "Sir," she replied, colouring up to her eyes, "whatever do you mean?" "Now, don't be offended with me, Clara," said I, "because this is the last chance I shall ever have of speaking to you about it; but this is what I mean, Clara—you're in love with being idolised, and -you're in love with Mr Blandy's money." Egad! but didn't I have a lively time with her after that. wouldn't have believed such a sweet young woman could have got into such a pucker. I was glad when it was over. She never spoke a word to me in the carriage, nor at the

church, nor at the breakfast—and never so much as said good-bye to me, let alone kiss me, when she and her ugly old husband drove away. She never wrote to any of us afterwards, and never came to see us. In fact, I've never set eyes on her from that day to this, and it's nigh upon ten years ago. I don't say one word against her, mind. Clara was a good and virtuous young woman, and, to the best of my belief, has always remained so.'

'Yes, of course she was,' interposed 'his lordship'; 'but don't you know, sir, without personalities, that virtue of any kind is only a comparative—not a positive thing? Clinch, there is no such thing as absolute honour, absolute virtue, or unswerving fidelity—in the whole wide world; and I say this—let no man lay "the flattering unction to his soul" that the woman he loves and possesses, however faithful she may be to him—in fact, is entirely so, in conception and desire. Without subscribing to the detestable thesis that "every woman is a rake at heart," I do say that roving fancies, stray gusts of passion—foreign, probably, to her intrinsic character, and, therefore, unbidden and unwelcome, sometimes move her being—although she will, very properly, conceal them from the man she loves, nay, from her very self, if she should be able. On the other hand, let no woman cherish the illusion that the man of her choice, who may have proved his love for her in a thousand ways, is faithful to her in the positive sense. All men are libertines by instinct, if not by resort, and the difference between the very good and the very bad in this respect—is only one of degree. Occasions will arise when he will forget his better self, and either seek or long for the caresses of others. "Variety is the spice of life," and the hankering after variety is inherent to humanity. It does not follow from all this that he and she are to be condemned in the main, for they are both virtuous and faithful, according to the common acceptation, only—if we must see things precisely as they are, as the doctor and the president have so urgently recommended us to, your paragons of virtue should confess to themselves that absolute purity, absolute fealty, complete integrity, are not possible with the best of us in this life, having existence only in the brains of romancists and in the realms above. Is there a man so honourable that he never, never does a paltry action, never tells a fib,

never commits himself in any way that he would be ashamed to have people discover? I say most emphatically, No; such a man never existed, does not exist, and never will, nor a woman of the same character, until we attain to that final condition, if we ever do, where the last shreds of evil shall be removed from us—to a state where virtue shall be its own evident and unvarying reward, and where we shall never have, nor think we have, to piece it out with petty vices and convenient subterfuges—in behalf of paramount self.'

'Now this I do call the very worm of corruption!' hotly exclaimed Danbie, 'for it would surely feed upon the substance of all experimental goodness. If this contention is to be allowed, you may proceed to give a bad name to every virtue that has foothold in the human heart. Courage you may call foolhardiness; friendship, only self-seeking of a more exquisite caste; the love of a mother, and all that belongs to it, mere animal instinct; and the affection between a man and his wife, even as to its higher forms, nothing but blind infatuation, or a congeries of equipoised interests and personal vanities. In every gentle attribute or high endeavour, the non possumus would be held before us.'

'Dear me, Mr Danbie!' ejaculated Dillwater, 'this is most exalted wisdom, and does you great credit, sir.'

'Yes, very pretty talk, indeed,' growled Huckaback; 'but I'm a plain man, and a practical, and I'll put it to you. sir, although you are just married, and though you do hold such high and mighty opinions about virtue, and so forth, whether you never told a lie in all your life, nor did a shabby action, nor ever had, to wrap it up as nice as I can for you, any improper partialities for the women? Come, now, Mr Danbie, confess, if you're the honest man you want us to believe you are.'

'I will not parry the thrust, sir,' responded Danbie, 'and I do not claim to be invulnerate; yet the wound you inflict is not a mortal one. I admit there is a scoundrel part within me, very like the scoundrel that exists in you, which is capable of the conduct about which you catechise me, but, thank God, there is also a better and a stronger part, which confronts and overcomes it. As to any occasional lapses of mine, it is not incumbent upon me to say anything

one way or another, unless mutual confessions take place all round, the same to be unreservedly explicit in your own I concede to no man the right of being my inquisitor-least of all to any member of this club, whose "stultified moralities" are evident enough to me, if, they are not to Mr Dover. And I say to you further, Mr Huckaback, and incidentally to every gentleman present, that I would no more victimise a woman or play with her affections than I would suffer her, if I could prevent it, to play with me. I know that my recent "assumption of the myrtle," as some of you call it, is a sore point, and that I am regarded as an enemy to your avowed principles. This I cannot help. You have invited me here to antagonise your opinions, and I shall do so, to the best of my abilities. This scoffing at the higher things of humanity, and especially at the marital relation, only evinces the bitterness of your hearts in recalling misused opportunities that are gone from you for ever. Marriage is serious, love is earnest, if it be love at all. Indeed, so far as I see, there is nothing which yields us the smallest blessing—that is not serious, just as there is no substantial happiness apart from earnest-The exclusive affection of a man for one particular woman, does not imply that he claims her to be superior to all other women, but that he regards her in detail, looking chiefly to her higher nature, deeply respecting and tenderly nurturing that, with all the loving wisdom of which he is capable. He will be adversative to her faults, and will help her to put them away—inviting her, at the same time, to alter and amend him—as to those numerous particulars in which he may be more imperfect than she is. This he will find easy and acceptable, because his gentle counsellor is the one being who has the full opportunity and continual desire to understand him, and to see the good which belongs to his motives, whatever complexion they may outwardly bear-thus at all times energising him with the force of her concentrated kindliness.'

'Delightful!' sneered Wightmight, in a cutting whisper.

'What a metaphysical lover,' quoth Staggers.

'In brief,' concluded Danbie, 'I make it, that the conjugal principle is that which unites itself with the graces of another of the opposite sex; makes them the standard of judgment as to the person beloved, and builds upon them

the fabric of its own progression—rendering to the dear one, a continual, studious, all-comprising esteem, however obvious the faults may be: and what is this, gentlemen, I would ask, but the closest charity, in mutual application.'

'Quite true, sir,' rejoined Udolfo Dillwater, 'and such charity as that, is undoubtedly the greatest of the virtues, and I suppose it will be conceded that we can't have too much virtue.'

'Rather say, if you please,' interrupted Clitheroe, 'that we can't have too many virtues; for it has long been apparent to me that any particular virtue, pushed to an extreme, becomes a vice or something analogous to it.'

'That's right enough,' broke in Huckaback. 'I remember a fellow who was so deuced charitable that he took off his coat and hat in the street one day and gave 'em to a beggar who was going about in his shirt-sleeves. It's a fact, sir, and the fool had to go home in a cab; but there—he ended his days in Colney Hatch.'

'Exactly so,' continued the dogmatical Kerfew, 'he had the one little itch of benevolence, and that drove him mad. Yes, sir, each virtue needs tempering with its opposite, to keep it within the bounds of reason, a sane condition of heart and mind being only possible in a happy exercise of

all the virtues together.'

'Precisely so, your lordship,' rejoined Huckaback, 'and this proves that our benedict here, in whose behalf we have just listened to such a fine eulogy, out of his own lips, is a very unworthy person; because he is harbouring for his one "bright, partikler star" all those beautiful feelings which he ought to spread out equally amongst his fellow-creatures—bringing plenty of 'em down with him to the "Forty Winks Club," which he doesn't do.'

'Hear, hear,' said Dibson Clinch.

'Allow me to observe, gentlemen,' remarked the president, 'that this charity you have been talking about, and which is so much advocated by religious people, must needs be only a provisional kind of virtue. Since Heaven, according to the prevalent doctrine, is a state of unmixed goodness and blessed sufficiency—what opportunities can there be for your charities and forbearances, in a community where everyone is equipped with all the perfections that he ought to have? No forgiveness can be needed

where there is nothing to forgive. No long-suffering can be exercised where there is nothing to endure: no bestowals can be sympathetically made or graciously received where the Universal Father is the All-sufficient Provider, vouch-safing to each beatified soul—the very sum of all things

which may contribute to its happiness.'

'Well, Mr Wightmight,' ventured Hardiwood Bent, 'I don't know what we can say to that, I'm sure—though it makes me think, as I often do, what a curious thing this church-going religion is; people go and sit in a fine building and gaze up at the architecture and the stained-glass windows, and listen to the grand organ and the beautiful singing, and the prayers, and the preaching, that have been going on just the same for hundreds of years; and getting worked up with one thing and another, they make certain they're worshipping God in His own house. But how do they know that? The Almighty never dropped a word to 'em as to how they should build that church or what kind of service they should hold in it.'

'Of course not,' added Wightmight, with a ready curl of the lip, 'they are simply glorifying the loftier fancies of their brother—Man, weighted as they are, with the sanction of a long-established usage and made otherwise impressive

by the fiat of widespread authority.'

'You are earthly-minded, sir,' cried Danbie; 'you are always eager to ridicule our higher aspirations, taking cognisance only of frailties and defections, where faith and

fealty have the greater place.'

'Well, I tell you what it is, Danbie,' interrupted M'Spavin, 'I don't like your psalm-smiting people, say what you please. I never go to church myself, but that doesn't signify. I had a man-servant once, Matthew by name, who, catch him when you might, was always warbling some hymn-tune or other; but that fellow, sir—why, I couldn't trust him out o' my sight, for his thievery. I was living alone at the time, out Finchley way, and sure as ever I came to town, that rascal 'ud be poking about in my drawers, to see what he could take, that he thought I shouldn't miss. I tried locking everything up, but it was no use; I found things missing just the same. When I accused him of taking 'em, he'd cast his eyes up like a saint and deny it till he was black in the face. So one day,

I'd driven in to Aldridge's, I remember, and when I got back I was a bit groggy.'

'We don't doubt it,' chipped in somebody across the

table.

'And while I was unlatchin' the door, I heard the fellow scuttle downstairs out o' my bedroom. So what did I do but fetch the horsewhip out o' the gig, and give that Matthew the damndest thrashing he ever had in his life, I'll swear, and kicked him out o' the house into the bargain. Gee-willikins! you should have heard the kind o' psalms he sung to me when he found himself on the wrong side o' the door, with his traps pitched after him. Why, he called me by every beastly name he could lay his tongue to. No, sir; no godly people for me. There's always something wrong about 'em—if it isn't one thing it's sure to be another.'

'I hope you don't impugn the authority of the Bible, sir,' solemnly deprecated Dibson, 'I come of a good Church of England family myself, and was brought up to honour the Prayer-book and the Word of God. I don't like to hear an elderly man talk in the way you do, especially when he might have "one foot in the grave, and plenty to answer for when his time comes."'

'What, sir? Are you allooding to me,' roared M'Spavin.
'I'll bet you a hundred pounds, straight off, that I shall out-

live the lot of you; what do you say to that?'

'I won't say anything to that, sir,' retorted Clinch, 'though you'd better not make too sure of yourself; but don't you rail at religion, for I can't bear to hear it. What progress do you think the world would have made, if we hadn't had Bible truth to go upon?'

'My dear sir,' spake Kerfew Clitheroe, impressively, stretching over the table in front of the captain, 'let me tell you this. Spirits of the false inhabit the staunchest dogmas, lurking in the guise of crafty plausibilities. Truly considered, the world is a school, and your progressive people are those only who are learning in it every day, not perhaps as touching abstract truth, which is doubtless immutable, for Eternity—a something which our finite intellects may never grasp, nor our froward hearts pay homage to, but in regard to those temporal phases of it, which, changing and evolving always, as the times progress and develop, are closely ap-

plicable to our conduct and guidance, as we, too, drifting to and fro, press onward and upward in the shifting spirals of our probationary lives; for solid character takes long to grow, and our stalwart virtues are those which, despite many positive and more apparent repulses, fight out their hard achievements at the last.'

'Yes, Clinch,' obtruded the president, 'and the Bible is a book full of perplexities and contradictions to every honest and well-taught man—bearing upon its face, indeed, the all too certain impress of human barbarity, craft and intolerance, however broadly acceptable its truths may be. Dibson, my friend, listen to this, and he turned squarely round to that sable and conservative gentleman. 'We have been treated, from the earliest ages, to the illusory dogmas and incubus fulminations of zealots and hierophants, while harking all along for the passionless dicta of a perfect God. For a boon like this, it would seem that we have had abundant occasion to hope, throughout the shameful, bloodstained history of this, our world. Nevertheless, from some inscrutable cause, which I have neither the insight to determine, nor the liberty, perhaps, to discuss, it has not, in my judgment, been accorded us. Hitherto, the world has had to be satisfied with little reasons for big things; but, believe me, we are approaching an epoch when it will seek big reasons for everything, and where these cannot be found, it will go without reasons at all. To be more precise; the preachments and theistic records of a transitory people, in a miniature land—however distinctive and exceptional, will not be taken to interpret the widespread, alien history of a senior world, much less will they be accepted as a masterkey to the vast, eternal mysteries of a boundless universe.'

'Whieu-u-u!' whistled Dillwater, under his breath.

'For shame, sir,' muttered Dibson, at the beginning of an awkward silence, which was broken at last, by a not too confident ejaculation of Captain Helmsley's, as he stared brazenly up and down the table.

'Well, p'r'aps he's right; who knows?'

But there was a manifest unwillingness to argue the question; the other 'Winkers' persistently stirring their brandy and water, thumbing their pipes and eyeing one another in silence; so the president, seeing that his impious assault was not to be supported, fell back in masterly fashion

upon the old lines, bristling like a hedgehog and as bitter as gall. 'Well, gentlemen,' said he, 'we've been wandering away from the subject, let us return to it. Our Apollo has given us a most charming synopsis of connubial bliss, from his point of view; now listen to mine. I say that marriage is a vested privilege conferred upon the stronger and more selfish individual of the two parties united, to browbeat and coerce the other—or if they should be equally strong and equally selfish, as often happens—'tis a chain that binds them in a rigid circle, to harry and tear and bedevil each other through life, to their heart's content.'

A long groan of assent went up from the corner where

Fledger was standing.

'What's the matter with you, sir?' sharply demanded Wightmight, turning round, 'does the shoe pinch you? Give us your valuable opinion upon the subject.'

'I—er—I haven't considered the matter as seriously as I ought to have done, sir,' gasped our great man, 'being too much engrossed with my profession, to study anything else in particular.'

Your profession, forsooth,' snarled the president. 'Now, in the name of all that is ludicrous, tell us what your pro-

fession was.'

'Well, sir, I conducted a nice academy for young gentlemen.'

'Oh, did you? you conducted a nice academy for young gentlemen. Just as I thought, by the living jingo!' was the exultant rejoinder. 'And pray what sort of young gentlemen did they send to your academy?'

'Very nice young gentlemen, sir, for the most part.'

'I don't doubt it, I can't doubt it. Nice young gentlemen and a nice academy; though I hazard the assertion that the parents couldn't have been over nice, to have sent their sons to be fooled by such a lop-jowled scarecrow as you. Have the goodness, Pilchard, to bring me the sherry, this bottle's empty. Not that, you loggerhead, that's whisky, that in the decanter, there,' and poor, broken-spirited Fledger did as he was commanded. The president tossed off a glass of the beverage—it was old and dry and biting, like himself—and rapping on the table, set the mill a-going once more. 'Mr Abrams,' said he, 'you've been looking on, all the evening, as quiet as 'q in the corner;' let me ask you now,

to contribute a few remarks about the women. They needn't be *Delilahs*, nor *Rahabs*, nor *Jezebels*, you know, but just ordinary women, as we understand them. Proceed, sir, we are all attention, and there's Apollo smacking his lips for

the tit-bits of your discourse.'

'Well, Mr Wightmight, the ladies are very nice, God bless 'em, very nice, I'm sure,' responded husky Dan, grinning down the middle of his nose; 'what should all we shentlemen have done without 'em? They bring us the children; and whatever should I have done without my three leetle sons?' (he was alluding to his nippers in the tailoring concern). 'But you must really excuse me this evening, shentlemen, for you all kicked up such a shindy last night, over that damn Tichborne, that my poor head hasn't got over it yet.'

'Very well, sir,' snapped the president, 'it's the same old complaint, though you never die of it; but we don't want

to listen to a numbskull.'

'Mr President, sir, I protest against such language.'

'Mr Abrams, sir,' shouted Wightmight, bringing down his gavel with a crash upon the table, 'you're excused; hold your tongue.' Abrams spread out his palms in mute protestation, squinted round at the company and shrugged his shoulders; then winking at Wightmight, settled back in his chair and picked his teeth.

'Now, gentlemen, break away,' cried the president, 'and

keep to the subject this time, for it's getting late.'

'Well, sir, I take the ladies to be like musical instruments,' put forth Dillwater, after a pause, 'for you can get all sorts of airs out of them; some very pretty ones, too, only you must play them yourselves. Here is a case in point. A friend of mine of many years ago, who moved in the best circles, took it into his head to marry an Irish person. She was a nobody, though quite pretty and intelligent. Well, gentlemen, he used to ring the changes on her in the funniest manner possible. A word, a look or a twitch of the nose was enough, and she would be grave or gay, silent or talkative, repellent or captivating, just according to how he manipulated her. He used to show her off at the dinner-table, in all her different styles,—tipping us the wink, to begin with, so as we should know what he was going to do. I tell you, it was the most ludicrous thing in

the world, how he would play upon the feelings of that woman.'

'What a despicable blackguard he must ha' been!' growled Micky Dowd.

'What, sir!' exclaimed Dillwater; 'he was a friend of mine

and highly connected.'

'I don't care a damn about his bein' a friend of yours, nor for his high connexions, nyther,' retorted Michael; 'I say he was a dhirty schoundrel, to treat a woman like that, and that woman his wife, too. If I'd been at his little dinner-

parties I'd ha' punched his head for him.'

'Bravo! Micky Rumpus,' shouted the colonel, 'that's right, stand up for your own people, like a man, though if she hadn't been an Irishwoman, eh, Micky? she might have gone to blazes, for anything you'd have cared. Now, I've seen a good deal of the Irish; we had lots of 'em in India. They make pretty good soldiers, if you keep 'em well under control. They're more like women than men, in many of their ways; just as irritable and impulsive, and almost as easy to handle, if you know how. As for the women, they're like children, about as unreasonable and mischievous, and the children, well, they're only little animals, and dirty little animals at that.'

'Dear me!' chimed in Dibson, 'I've heard that the women over in Ireland are of easy virtue, and now I can

believe it.'

'And who told you that?' roared Michael.

'Never mind who told me, sir; it's no business of yours.'

'Bizness or no bizness,' cried the wrathy Hibernian, 'that man wuz a liar, whoever he waz. Why the Irishwomen, sir, are the most virtuous women in Europe. They've an aisy, jokin' sort uv a way wid 'em, onlike your cut and dried Englishwomen; but they have their proper pride, sir, and for downright, thoroughgoin' morality, I'll back 'em aginst all the worrld.'

'Well, Micky, there's one thing about 'em—we all know,' persisted Dibson, 'these Irishwomen of yours make splendid mothers. Let 'em alone for "downright, thoroughgoing" maternity, anyhow, and I presume that even our friend Clitheroe will not dispute that motherhood is the highest and noblest attribute of a woman. There's a

sop for you, "Rumpus."

'Ha! ha! ha-a!' shouted the company, while Michael's face flushed as red as a carrot.

'Certainly I do deny it, sir,' responded Clitheroe. hold that the highest attribute of any creature must proceed from its own individual excellence, and not in the least from its exploits in fecundity. We are constrained to share the faculties of reproduction, together with the instinctive affections which belong to them, with the meanest animals; and the more ignoble the animal the more prolific it is. Hence I claim that it is not the profuse and everlasting reduplication of ourselves which constitutes our nobility; for multiplication is not expansion, neither is lateral activity-lofty evolution; and that our highest attributes are emphatically those, the exercise of which may be reciprocated by others in kind; partaken of and requited in the fullest sense by our brothers and sisters in humanity. In brief, a co-ministry of equals upon the higher planes of self-development. Wherefore, I conclude, Mr Clinch, that wifehood, not motherhood, is the noblest attribute of a woman, and should be the occasion of her chiefest praise. Nor does this view militate against the dignity of motherhood; since maternity being, as it is, the natural sequence of wifehood, may always be depended upon to sufficiently assert itself. We know that the fruit will contain the seed; but I contend that the fruit was not made for the sake of the seed—its own intrinsic worth being its patent and paramount quality. Then let us, gentlemen, in all wisdom, hold in the greater esteem, those higher capabilities of ours, which, being distinctively human, are in no measure shared with us by the lower animals; and I say again, that wifehood in its worthier sense, not motherhood in any sense, is the highest and noblest attribute of a woman.'

'Upon my word! your lordship,' broke out the president, 'this transcendentalism of yours is most enchanting, and I do wonder how a gentleman of your ethereal mould can breathe in such a gross and fuliginous atmosphere as this,' and he waved his hand about him in the wreathing tobacco smoke. 'We really ought to clap you under a glass-case, and pipe you down an aura from the heavens above. Behold! I drink to your lordship's most exquisite, unspotted conception of the higher nobilities of mankind

in general and of womankind in particular,' and bowing superbly to Clitheroe, he tossed off another glass of his biting old sherry.

Banter like this was enough to make a saint swear, but Kerfew only smiled at it. Bland and temperless, he never minded ridicule so long as anyone would listen to him; so, gravely filling his glass with generous port, he drained a

complaisant draught in honour of himself.

Wightmight was foiled, as he always was when attacking Clitheroe. In his encounters with the other 'Winkers,' his overbearing acumen and superior education always gave him the advantage, but in 'his lord hip's' case he could boast of neither. So he accepted the situation as a matter of course, resolving to avenge himself upon somebody else. Looking at his watch and turning sharply round upon Huckaback, who had been steadily munching the comestibles handed down to him off the sideboard, he decided to land that worthy a backhander, by way of a wind-up.

'Hucky,' he exclaimed, 'will you never leave off gorging? I've heard your voracious jaws crunching close to my ear the whole evening. Why, man alive! you devour three times as much as is good for you.' (Wightmight himself was a chronic dyspeptic and hated to see anybody eat with

a relish.)

'Never a bit of it, Wellesley, my boy,' answered Enos, choking down the latter half of a sponge cake, 'an old man, like an old horse, wants well keeping up, don't yer know. Once you let him run down, you never get him up again.'

'That's right enough,' growled M'Spavin.

'Yes,' concluded Huckaback, 'it's all over with him, and

you may as well pack him off to the hospital.'

'Very possible, I admit, with an ingrained hog like you,' was the virulent rejoinder, 'though you'll take devilish good care not to give us a chance to effect any such happy despatch in your own case. Gentlemen all! it's twelve o'clock and this meeting is adjourned,' and he tucked his 'tippoo' into his breast-pocket and got up from his chair; 'but before we separate,' said he, with a pungent smile, 'let us drink a glass all round to the watch-words—"Liberty, Equality and Fraternity," not as the French understand them, but as they are exemplified and maintained in this "Forty Winks Club."'

'Exactly so,' quoth Dillwater, wisely stroking his beard.

'Ay, ay, my hearty,' cried the captain, giving the table a parting thump.

'Hoo-roar! That we will,' snorted M'Spavin, in an out-

burst of lushy camaraderie.

There was a clinking of bottles and glasses, as the 'Winkers' poured out their potions, and a smacking of lips, as they rose to depart; but 'his lordship' hadn't done with them yet, for he was determined to have the last words.

'Liberty! gentlemen? What nonsense!' he exclaimed, warming with his wine. 'Equality! what a tinselled lie; Fraternity! what arrant humbug! There is no equality between man and man, and there never can be. All the world over, the strong take the right of way and the weak are driven to the wall. The universal law of selfishness always prevails. Where then is there any room for Liberty, Equality or Fraternity? those catch-words which have cost so much blood and will cost so much more? What! Liberty—alike for Force and Weakness? Equality! between hard-handed Compulsion and cringing Necessity? Fraternity! between Master and Minion? between the Slave who is down and the Tyrant who stands over him? Bah! the idea is too ridiculous to be entertained for a moment by any mature and sensible man, who, having cast behind him the idols which have fooled his adolescence, looks straightly and fearlessly at things as they have been and things as they are. I'll tell you what it is, gentlemen,' but the other 'Winkers,' had had enough of him for one night and were impatient to get home. They had already put on their hats and overcoats and were pushing their way to the ante-room; so Kerfew withheld his peroration, wiped his mouth, and donning his shabby 'Inverness' and shabbier 'wideawake,' followed in the footsteps of the boozy crowd. . .

'I say, gents,' bellowed Spawlding M'Spavin, as he stumbled along the passage beside Captain Helmsley, 'when we come to the bar, let's all get blind drunk and

make beasts of ourselves.'

'One beast is enough, sir, for the present,' cried Wightmight, just behind him.

'Come along, doctor,' said the captain, 'you're rolling

like a Dutch galliot in the Bay of Biscay; let me give yer a tow,' and they staggered out together to the doctor's gig, which was waiting in readiness for him. 'Bear a hand here, Jack,' shouted Helmsley, to the groom, who was holding the horse's head; and between them they hoisted 'Thankee, captain, by-bye,' Spawlding into his seat. he grunted, 'I shall be devilish glad to get between the sheets to-night, for it blows cold, and somehow I've got a blarsted bad headache comin' on. Let her go, Johnny,' and he turned up his coat collar and clumsily tucked himself in with the horse-cloth. So 'Johnny' jumped up beside his master, and giving 'Betsy' the 'ribbons,' tickled her flanks with his whip, and off they plunged; M'Spavin's bulky and muffled form being just visible for a moment, en silhouette, between the gig-lamps, as they dashed away in the darkness.

Poor old brute! He didn't take anybody to the 'ploughing-match at Pinner,' for he never went himself. He was found dead in his bed, the very next morning, of a 'blood-clot on the brain.' The 'champagne lunch' was ravished by the servants. Before the week was out, 'Johnny,' in the dog-cart, drove 'stylish Betsy' to 'Tattersall's' and *left* her there, and doffed his 'new livery' for a suit of mourning, when 'he rode behind' his master to Highgate Cemetery.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AN EPIC OF TWO LIVES

My theme now enters upon a signal transmutation; so come a-flitting with me, reader mine, from Hampstead Hill, across the daisied fields, to Hornsey; away from the 'Wheatsheaf' parlour to a cosy drawing-room in a sequestered home that nestles on the banks of the New River. There I will unveil you a picture, not fraught with harsh discordancy but implete with the gentle harmonies of two blended lives. London, had but lightly laid its impress upon winsome.

rural Hornsey. Here you found the richest meadows and the leafiest lanes of all the northern environs. Beyond its grouping elms and hedgerows, the great Metropolis spread out—a shimmering diorama in the distant grey.

In sylvan byways and shady vistas, between the fields, reposed many a quaint suburban villa, embowered in mantling arborescence, 'mid sloping lawns and flower-beds, with thickets interspersed, of lilac, laurel and laburnum; and over the upland pastures, far and wide, and through the massy woods that half engirded Highgate, the merry birds made music all day long.

Tis here we find our halting-place.

Sylvania Lodge was a charming retreat, roomy, bowwindowed and substantial. It was shut in from the quiet road with a profusion of flowering shrubbery and sheltered, on the north, with a stately row of overhanging trees. A long garden led gently down in front to the water's edge, where a clump of weeping willows dipped their budding leafage to the stream, canopied the arbour on the wellkept lawn, mingled with the fernery on the river-bank and caressed the rustic boathouse near by. A broad verandah faced this pleasance, between the bay windows of the house above, and a curtain of jessamine and honeysuckle, intertwined, hung luxuriant upon its trellised sides, festooned the walls up to the eaves, and half concealing, draped the bedroom windows. Out in the centre of the trim parterre stood a marble cupid, from whose distended cheeks there spouted up a dancing spray, which raining softly down again upon the water-plants beneath, dimpled the rockcircled pool, surrounding. Everything about this dainty domicile betokened the mutual solicitudes and mobile gladness of the mistress and the master.

It was eventide, placid and tender. The sinking sun had flushed the western sky carmine and ruddy gold, and the church bells of Hampstead and Highgate were echoing

sweet symphonies across the fields.

Francis Danbie and Agnes his wife, sate together in their low-ceiled drawing-room at Sylvania Lodge. She was reading *Pendennis* to him, and breathing latent love in her modulated words; and he was responding to the language of her eyes, and dwelling upon her beauty and her charming sensibility—so easily pained, so willingly pleased.

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If you what was amost in a simple sun if darkest to the real at an ipacy in clark which it show good a court, for the jet averagin, he quitted as the madge of a more and the rule of Field. The mendian of his life was not compact, but he face while recording a brave continuity of high conduction both the senior marks of painful contests any contained. His past had been unhappy; indeed, for many wearsome years, it had seemed to him as though

he were tossing on a stormy sea, far from a haven of eventual rest; without advantage, too, in an ethical sense, though he had since come to see that his tribulations had been of sovereign benefit to his better part. Moved by his untutored sympathies, Danbie had contracted a misalliance, which proved an ill-assortment of the most hopeless kind. Thenceforward, his life had been heavily clouded. Conjugality in some form was a necessity of his nature, hungering, as it always did, for the pabulum of the feminine principle; so he had patiently taken up his thankless task,to conciliate opposites and to match the unmatable. proved futile. It always does, where hearts and minds are radically inimical. Love, as he needed it, as also he would have given it, never came home to him, therefore, he surrendered himself to Counsellor Duty, ignoring his exigence and waiving all recompense.

The task and the taskmistress at length had passed away. Youth had also vanished, along with its figments and foibles; yet, chastened manhood,—self-ustained, now most properly belonged to him; courage, vigour, high control, were especially his; whilst his heart had refused to harden or grow old. His former infelicities and introversions, while imposing a weight upon his patient spirit, had endowed him with a happy equipoise and longanimity,—exalting his thoughts, uplifting his affections, and holding him superior to deliberate sin. Now, his head was clear, his vision keen, his feelings elastic, and his heart-sound. Evil hath but scant assailment with a spirit like that.

Danbie was an author, and had made his mark in the

literary world.

One of the fairest of Britain's daughters was Agnes Danbie. She had been christened Agnes Isabel, and Agnes was her better name; but Danbie had known an Agnes whom he had not admired, so he preferred to call her Isabel, especially as she reminded him of a favourite sister Amabel, who had died many years before.

This lovely woman had a form and countenance which were classically perfect; yet, although she might fittingly have posed for a Greek goddess, she was anything but impassionate or statuesque. Her figure was lithe and graceful, and of fine proportions, and her face might well have confounded the veriest misogynist,—with its winsome, queenly

Her eyes were of a warm, clear grey, the iris large, the pupil full and expansive. Her nose was of an exquisite Grecian type, faultlessly sensitive and refined. Her mouth and chin were firm and sweet. Her brow was broad and high and finely intellectual, her hair wavy and luxuriant, soft and brown, burnished with a glint of cool gold. She had a habit of gentle speaking, and a voice that was low and modulated, though it could be very sonorous if she were greatly moved. When in repose (that eloquent repose of a happy woman) her features were a model of feminine dignity; but should she be conversing interestedly, especially with the man she loved, a nimble galaxy of emotions would be coming and going in her beautiful face; delightsome humour would frolic about the corners of her mouth, a host of sprightly sympathies and little mischiefs, perhaps, would gambol in her eyes and play hide and seek in the ready dimples that cosied her cheeks, while the bright carnation which came and went in prompt obedience to her quickened fancies, was like a rosy blush at dawn of day; albeit her manners were as unaffected as her motives were ingenuous. Thus was this lady supremely beautiful,—a veritable pearl of womankind,—a soulful creature, instinct with lively sensibilities, and fresh from the moulding of her Maker. Nathless, she was not without womanly failings, nor others which are common to us all; yet so warm-hearted was she, so sweet, so pure and tender, so altogether charming, that none but a churl would have consented to heed them.

Agnes was clad in a 'princess robe' of fine velveteen, of a deep sub-shade of crimson. It was open to a point at the breast, had short hanging sleeves, gathered loosely into pleats at the elbows, and was otherwise perfectly plain, though daintily trimmed at the neck and sleeves with rich point-lace. This was a dress of Danbie's own designing, and it perfectly fitted her symmetrical form, imparted to her creamy complexion the brilliancy of alabaster, and to the pink of her cheeks a bloom and a freshness, unsurpassable.

Between Danbie and his fair consort there were no contrarieties nor reservations, although they differed greatly in several respects. Agnes was in the full tide of her youth and beauty, unclouded of spirit, untouched by care, and deliciously conscious of her own sufficiency, in all her gentle harmonies with her husband; while Danbie was in the quiet flow of maturity, within perceptible distance of the approaching ebb, and being as gravely mindful of the years that were coming as of these which had gone before he could be lightsome only by reflection from his sunny companion. Intellect, feeling, character, were markedly his, and they failed not to render him attractive; yet he was not a handsome man, and this he knew, for he was accustomed to making just comparisons, had schooled himself to see himself from an outward point of view, and was duly sensible of his disabilities, in all his tender intercourse with that dearly-loved one, who was the mainspring of his life, and the centre of his happiness.

What was his wooing? How did he win her?

Was it by that magnetic power of the strong over the weak, so plausibly assigned to letter-press heroes of a frequent type? Not a whit of it. Nothing occult belonged to him; besides that in most things—his lady was as potential as he.

Was it by the lust of manful conquest, masking in the easy habitudes of manly affection? (a vanity this which goads men on to fruitless, false achievements). By no

means; Danbie was innocent of all such virility.

Or did he in any measure gain her by the brute momentum of fevered sexuality, so rampant, blind and overbearing? Most assuredly not, for this was a rabies which had never obsessed him; nor, if it had, could it have wrought him anything but aversion and contempt

with a maiden like Agnes Montith.

Not such ways did Francis Danbie win Agnes for his wife; but by virtue of his unalterable, patient love for her, his fixed devotion, his invariable and unvarying esteem for her, throughout the crucial period of their hearts' approachment. The maiden had seen these things, and had fully understood, and it had insensibly exalted her, even as it had visibly fortified him, and this alike they jointly knew; she, so calmly constant, proudly kind; he, so humbly fond and proudly true. Here is the tale of their courtship. It hath no stirring incident, yet is it fraught with the fears and joys and high resolves of a master-passion reciprocally felt and mutually confessed. . . .

Francis had always been partial to a rural life, and this

predilection had led him lately to exchange his house in London for a cosy cottage at Greenhithe. There, with his garden and his conservatory, his trusty serving-man and a maidservant, who was a paragon of domesticity, his snug little study that opened out upon the flowers, with its strew of books, its busts of famous men and its dilettante curiosities, he passed his time in chastened thought and ordered industry.

Business called him to London on Saturday mornings, and he would usually go by way of Tilbury and Fenchurch Street, as it necessitated a brisk walk into Gravesend and gave him a whiff of salt air from the 'sea reach' while crossing the river.

Now, a year or so before, Agnes Montith had come from St Leonards to live with her widowed aunt at Graves-end. This aunt was a Mrs Mildred Clitheroe, whose husband had been brother to Kerfew Clitheroe, he of the 'Forty Winks Club.'

Agnes was a north-country lass, her parents were of good family and belonged to Greenock, where Agnes was born. While still a small child, they had taken her with them to India, Mr Montith going out to the Civil Service there. Her father had died in the second year of their stay, and her mother had returned home, broken in health and spirit, and with only a slender subsistence. She could no longer endure the rigours of North Britain, and in the South, where she was constrained to live, she had no relations, saving her sister Mildred, whose husband was not congenial to her. Agnes was her only child and she devoted herself to her daughter's training with a singleness of heart only possible perhaps to a woman circumstanced as she was.

Agnes loved her mother tenderly, and was a most dutiful and teachable girl, profiting in every way by the maternal solicitudes. Years of dear companionship graced their later lives, and when the mother's last hour had come, she commended her precious one to the care of her Aunt Mildred. Agnes was left an orphan, at the age of twenty, to solve the serious problems of her life. Virtually, she was alone in her bereavement, for she had made but few acquaintances, and her aunt, although possessed of the best intentions, was a self-engrossed old lady, who had

lately lost her husband and whose children,—the two she had had, were long since married and gone to foreign lands.

Under these conditions, if she had chosen, Agnes might well have entered upon a life of easy idleness; but this would have been foreign to her nature, which was essentially active and energetic; besides, she could not brook a state of pecuniary dependence. With the aid of her father's old friends she found pleasant occupation of a literary sort,—indexing and correcting for an old-established firm of educational publishers. This work she did at home, although it frequently took her to town, and often on Saturday mornings, too, by the Tilbury Railway to Fenchurch Street.

Thus it chanced that Danbie first saw Agnes. He was reading on the steam-boat crossing the Thames. Glancing around him, his eyes lit suddenly upon the most beautiful being he could remember ever to have seen. It was Agnes Montith. She was sitting opposite, amid a motley crowd, and was sorting some papers in her lap. Danbie was struck with admiration, and almost insensibly, fell to regarding her, only to absorb the picture of her exquisite presentmentthe lovely features, the queenly head, the graceful, wellformed figure; a face of sweet intelligence, with dignity combined, and all the native charm of inborn ladyhood. He gazed upon her gladsomely, lingeringly, as we would behold some fascinating prospect, we durst not hope to see again; and as he rode up to town, his first impression deepened into conviction—that he had never set eyes on so beautiful a woman.

As Danbie sat alone in his study that evening, the depths of his spirit stirred within him. Soon he found himself thinking of his next trip to London, and wondering if it would be his fortune to see her again. He went to bed hoping that he might sleep off his infatuation, but in the morning it had not abated. Times there were in the ensuing quiet of his week at home when he sternly told himself that he must not surrender to such boyish fancies, and he strove to return with undivided allegiance to his books and his work and his sober recreations, and all with well-approved success; yet, nathless, when Saturday came, he was confounded with his own alacrity in taking the road to Gravesend, and with the conscious trepidation with which

he seated himself on the boat. Anxiously he scanned the incoming crowd, and the quick leaping of his heart, as Agnes, entering amongst the last, sat down near to him in sweet unwittingness, convinced him that he was not the master of himself he had so manfully intended to be.

Again he sought her loveliness—with irresistible delightveiled, though it was, in mindfulness of her close proximity. Their eyes met. Danbie was contemplating her with affectionate reverence, which in a man so staid, could hardly prove offensive: nor was Agnes affronted, but quietly returned his gaze and looked away; yet she was plainly conscious that he was interested in her, and as this appeared disconcerting, he bent himself to his book, glancing at her afterwards, only occasionally, though his quickened senses now perceived that nothing marred the concord of her beauty, and his heart seemed to whisper him,— 'You have found your ideal.'

Protesting with himself, he followed her into the train, and as he subsequently realised, sat brutally opposite to her in the same compartment. Neither presumed to notice the other; yet, ere they went their ways that morning, the two had looked steadfastly into each other's eyes, he with a thrill of new-found tenderness, she with brave experiment, seeking to learn what manner of man this was, and whether he might be worthy of a passing thought.

Danbie went home that evening in Love's enthrallment. The shrouds of his life seemed to be lifting away; a bright new vista opened before him, suffused with the tints of fairyland. Agnes was in all his heart, and he sought no longer to banish her.

But now there came a time of doubt and disappointment,

for he did not see her again in many weeks.

Miss Montith was taking counsel with herself. thinking of Danbie, she had inly confessed to a partiality she could hardly comprehend, for he was not quite pleasing to her natural fancies,—which rather took objection to his sedate seniority. She saw he was no trifler, and she felt that he was no libertine, yet vaguely she feared him, as vaguely—feared herself. She knew nothing of men, other than by garbled tales of evil import, which had reached her in her quiet home; so with virgin wisdom she resolved to hold herself aloof and guard the portals of her heart

going up to town by the North Kent Railway, although it landed her inconveniently in the city.

Meanwhile, Danbie who had sought her each Saturday in vain, at length concluded that she had taken offence, strove to convict himself of heedless vanity, looked in his glass with a bitter smile, and reverted to his labours with unflinching diligence and sombre resignation. Still, when the Saturdays came round, he never missed his wonted

journey, hoping against hope, to see her again.

At last, one morning, Agnes reappeared. Impelled by an irksome unrest, she had concluded it was foolish to avoid him. 'Whatever am I afraid of?' she had asked herself. 'The man is nothing to me; besides, what harm could he do me, even if he should wish to? Cannot I protect myself?' Yes, indeed she could, though maiden subterfuge was hoodwinking her judgment; for as she seated herself now, discreetly apart from him, her eyes sought his for an anxious, interrogative, gentle moment, and they told him instantly—before she had realised it—that she was in no wise willing he should forget her.

Danbie's quick response was a look of joyous gratitude, which gained for him a swiftly conquered blush, as Agnes busied herself, perseveringly, with the papers in her lap. He stole near to her, at the boat's head, whilst they all waited to land, and gazed wistfully after her, when, alighting from the train, she crossed into the city with the busy crowd; Agnes gave him a guarded glance as she passed out of sight. That was all; yet Danbie went home that evening in serenity and peace. Now he could be patient, now he could hope once more.

These amenities wore on for many months,—the maiden always circumspect, yet giving him to feel she was not indifferent to him. But if he should approach her too obviously, she would absent herself for a time, as if to convince him there could be no speaking under the circumstances; yet during all this period of interdiction, these

twain were keenly studious of each other.

Danbie, on his part, had formed an elaborate estimate of his fair inamorata, and was perfectly persuaded of her womanliness and worth. He had noted besides, that she never disfigured herself with the fripperies of fashion, nor made incessant changes, though her attire was never want-

ing in that nicety which marks the lady. He also saw that the more complaisant she might be with the few who had a speaking acquaintance with her, the less did she invite any familiarity; whereas, in his own case, she now frequently (at near him, or glanced at him from afar, and although she never favoured him with so much as the ghost of a smile, and seldom noticed him when he approached her, yet upon occasion when she did, her look seemed to come from the depths of her soul. For the brief span of that rare accordancy, he felt there was a banishment of coyness, a subjugation of fear; and while in return, he met her eyes with fervent admiration, he saw they were as cool, and calm, and deeply clear as a spotless lake of the mountains.

Agnes, on the other hand, perceived that through all the stringency she imposed upon her lover, he contrived to show himself loyal, in his helpless way; that he was always mindful of her extreme sensibility, and tolerant of her occasional caprices, also that he never wavered, never seemed to change, and that all his bearing towards her—was a patient, pathetic appeal to her womanly heart.

One day, while sitting in the train beside her, Danbie ventured to address Miss Montith with a few inconsequent remarks, but she gave him only a brief and cold reply, and this, to a man of his sensitive nature, was a sufficient repulse. He did not speak again for the remainder of their journey; while Agnes seemed impatient of his presence, and quickly

disappeared upon their arrival in town.

Danbie was sustained for a time in the shock of this rebuff by a natural resentment, for he felt, all things considered, that he had not deserved such pointed discourtesy. 'She would have been more considerate to a perfect stranger,' he complained to himself, and he called to mind several occasions when she had been. But this irritation passed away, to be followed by a feeling of profound despair, which might have been less extreme had he been schooled in maidens' ways.

That night, he fell to thinking that Agnes had been fooling him, though he painfully concluded, as the morning dawned, that he had simply and sedulously been fooling himself; mistaking her kindly commiseration for an evidence of love. He expected now that she would avoid him for a long time—and so she did, not through anger, or any aversion, but

because she was sensible of how deeply she must have hurt him; was reproaching herself for having done so, and with true womanly indirectness, and a modicum of fear, was shrinking from the occasion of a final issue.

Meanwhile, Danbie took up his duties in heaviness of spirit, combating his gloomy hours with crippled industry, until his dainty little study seemed a very prison to him. Often, he would wander, restless, in his garden, seeking solace in his wealth of budding flowers; for it was the 'merry month of May,' astir with the pregnance of summer; but they only gave stress to the void of his winter within, and he recoiled from the merciless contrast. In process of time he convinced himself that Agnes could never be more to him than a sweet dream, and counted himself singularly misfortunate in having seen her at all. Finally, after much distressful discipline, he braced himself to his labours, resolving to forget her—treading dumbly along the highways of duty, since the paths of privilege were denied him.

But there came a time when fair Agnes returned to her

former journeyings.

Danbie feared to look at her, now that she sat distantly When he did, her manner was preoccupied. Yet her mere presence gave him heart of grace, and led him unexpectedly to hope again. For all his ripened judgment he could do no otherwise. His love for her would not die. She was his heart's desire, and he felt that, for good or evil, he was like plastic clay in her hands. His eyes swam with irrepressible tears as he furtively gazed upon her. He had with him a letter which called for close perusal, and it afforded him an opportunity for hiding his weakness. But while thus apparently engrossed, Agnes was regarding him from behind her book. Love's vision is adroit, and she failed not to mark his altered mien and careworn face, and they moved her deeply. Her eyes were resting tenderly upon him, when he glanced up at her, and in a moment each was self-convicted. Agnes blushed and turned away, but the veil between them was rent in twain. . . .

He stood behind her, as they waited to go off the boat, meekly, respectfully, as he had done so many times before; and Agnes knew it, though she would not see him. He drew so near to her that his eyes inadvertently rested in the sunlight, upon the silky down beneath her shapely ears. So close together stood they that, had there been silence, instead of the hum of many voices, they might have heard the beating of their quickened hearts. So close, that it needed only the encirclement of Danbie's arm to have clasped the dear one to his breast; nevertheless, as he assumed, the distance between them must still be measured in metaphorical

But just as they were going ashore, Agnes turned to him with a steadfast look of coy endearment, which she accentuated with a head-toss of feigned indifference, and ere his gladdened eyes could make reply, she was buried in the jostling throng. Danbie found himself sitting opposite to her when the train started. All the way to London the pair were self-absorbed; yet when they reached the terminus, Miss Montith gave her lover a timely proof that she was not so composed as she had assumed to be, for, alighting hastily on the platform in front of him, she left her hand-bag on the seat behind. Danbie caught it up and hurried after her.

'Pray excuse me, miss,' said he, 'but this bag, I believe, is yours.' They had reached the street. Agnes halted in confusion, blushing painfully. She took the bag with a

gentle whisper,-

'Oh, thank you—yes; I am much obliged,' and was stepping hastily away, when Danbie spoke again, in words that trembled with unconquerable emotion,-

'Tell me once for all, tell me; may we not speak?'
There was a pause. The maiden paled and looked down. She was contending with herself; virgin pride and the fixed proprieties against her awakening love, which she was conscious she had not concealed, guarded though it had been by her all-protective modesty. At this crucial moment, too, she gauged the sore trial of that heart which was pleading so bravely to be taken nearer to her, and she would not, could not, answer—No. With a supreme effort she quelled her scruples, and, concealing her earnestness in a half-smile, she replied to him firmly and very kindly, while the bright, pure blood mantled her cheeks, 'If you so very much wish it, I think we may.'

'A thousand thanks for those dear words,' was the low response that broke from Danbie's lips, and, although he dared not trust himself to look in her face, the gentle inflection of her downcast head told him plainly she was sensible of his gratitude.

'And now, sir,' she said, 'I must ask you to leave me,'

as she turned to go away.

'Certainly,' he murmured, bowing deeply, 'and may we

meet again.

'I think so. Yes,' was the kind reply, but as they parted, each sought the other, Danbie to find his dear one's face was full of tenderness, and Agnes to perceive that her lover's careworn caste had already changed to one of grateful hope and almost boyish gladness.

Deferentially they drew together, when next they met,

sitting side by side in gentle courtesy.

They courted sweet acquaintance, as the weeks passed by, and tacitly cherished their loves. They gave each other many details of their lives and thoughts, opinions, pursuits and predilections, besides discussing things irrelevant, yet they probed not the question that was nearest their hearts. Should Danbie, thereon, make tentative advance, Agnes would forfend it in her kindly way, though everything she said, and all she did, only made him love her the more devotedly.

At first, this prudent intercourse came so grateful to him, after multipled years of joyless seclusion, that his heart was sated with halcyon satisfactions, and the veriest commonplaces between them seemed weighted with a precious value; yet it could not long suffice for the positive principle of his affectional nature, and soon he yearned to unbosom himself and tell her all. Trains and boats and crowded streets were quite impossible to his purpose, but while walking home with her one evening from the Ferry, he led the conversation to the subject of love, and charming Agnes impersonally acquiesced. He talked of platonisms, affinities and ideals, and the transition thence was easy—to a personal confession, and this Danbie made in his guileless way, though his speech was low and passionate and his manner most profound.

'Fair girl, I love you with my whole soul. Isabel, your name implies everything to my heart—that is dear and sweet of womankind. Your favour, your beauty, your friendship are the only things for which I live—in which I hope. Nothing else to me is of consequence now. The world

holds me no happiness apart from you.'

'Oh, pray forbear, Mr Danbie,' broke forth Agnes, in

sudden agitation, 'please do not go on. This is altogether unseasonable, indiscriminate—what shall I say? Besides now,' she murmured, 'what do I know about you, sir? You may be deceiving me; I don't say you are, but—I'm afraid I've been foolish in permitting our acquaintance, without—without an introduction, and I'm sure Aunt Clitheroe would be very angry with me if she knew it.'

'Your Aunt Clitheroe!' exclaimed Danbie in surprise.
'Forgive me, my dear Miss Montith, but can your aunt be related, I wonder, to an old friend of mine, a Mr Kerfew

Clitheroe, of Downshire Hill, Hampstead?'

'Why, yes!' replied Agnes, surprised in her turn, 'he

and my uncle were brothers.'

'How singular this is,' said Danbie, 'and how very strange we did not happen upon it before. Now, you complain of the irregularity of our acquaintance; may I ask our mutual friend to introduce us?'

'No, sir; under the circumstances, I think you'd better not,' Agnes quickly replied. 'Besides,' she laughingly added, 'Mr Clitheroe has very peculiar opinions, and—he might object—and then, what would you do, Mr Danbie.'

'My dear Miss Montith, I should try to do without him,'

was Danbie's prompt reply.

But they had reached the homeward end of their walk, and little more might now be said; so taking her hand, as they stood to say good-bye, he tenderly asked her, 'May I write to you?'

'Yes,' she answered—archly smiling.

'But will you read my letter with kind indulgence?'

'I will indeed,' was her serious reply; 'so now adieu.'

'Adieu then, precious one,' the grateful lover said, and with a parting look into each other's eyes, they went their ways—Agnes to seek the quietness of her chamber, and Danbie to tramp bravely away to his distant home, in rapt communion with his ardent thoughts.

This was the letter he sent over from Greenhithe, the next day, by his trusty serving-man, and fair Agnes read it

with very kind indulgence.

'MAIDEN SWEETNESS,—Forgive me that I do not write you Miss, for my heart's deference is impatient of truisms and would not be bounded by mere punctilio. 'Twere

hard addressing you in measured terms, fair Isabel, obedient though I am, to every dictate of profound respect—seeing that my thoughts of you beget tender aspirations which are in urgent quest of frank expression. Chide me not, Isabel, 'tis your own gracious spirit which impels me. You are the dear sorceress who stirs my deeper depths, bidding him to "arise; come forth" who has hitherto slept—a man to

your own creating.

'Our gentle intercourse is unspeakably precious to me, imbounded though it is by our habitudes of every day; the city's busy strife comes all too soon to vex my fervent memories, while the weeks are lengthened solitudes until I see you again. I am always recoiling from the insistence of things around me, and reverting to your kindnesses past. In you, dear Isabel, I have found my ideal, my everpresent, all-sufficient inspiration, while I humbly trust that you are not indifferent to me. Then, how sweet it would be, oh, so sweet—to woo the higher mysteries of each other's lives; shunning the hackneyed roads of love-making, courting its sequestered paths—paths for two alone; them to follow through all the windings of their progressive way: marking the beauties unveiled around us; deeply mindful of our better selves. Dear one, what wealth of flowers and fruit, what sylvan greenery and shaded sunshine should greet us there—and while, in after time, we tarried, looking back through the vistas of our accomplished course, we would soulfully remind each other of our speedings by the way, wherein the alternate helpful hand had ne'er been wanting-each to the other in commutual kindness, "guide, philosopher, and friend," by loyal service, spirit-union, love.

'Isabel, dearest, may we not enter those progressive paths? thus to press forward in a joyous new creation? Thus to swell the diapason of our lives with our souls' best music? This world's matrice bears our infant future. Here we plant our faith and bend our lives—to mend or mar, to grovel or to soar, throughout—responsible to none but the Universal Father (may His spirit lead us). So here, let us bind our fellowship and fix our seals—jointly to forecast us in the great unknown. Hitherto, we have met only in the presence of others. I beg of you to come with me, Isabel, into the greenwood, amid the twilight slumbers of the scented day; and the primroses beneath

your feet, and the canopies of emerald above you, shall be your happy harbingers of summer; 'twere all your meet surrounding. There will I ask you if you love me. There let your answer mark the fate of Francis Danbie.

'P.S.—I do not go to town next Saturday, for that shall be a sacred day to me; but I will go over to Purfleet early in the afternoon, and I ask you, dear one, to meet me there, upon your return from London.

F. D.'

He was pacing the platform at Purfleet Station. He had expressed himself freely to her, heartfully, boldly; it was like the man, yet it did not follow that he could be easy or overweening; nor was he.

What if the approaching train should fail to bring her? or if it did, and she would not alight? What if this drama of his were but stage-play of hers, and he was only hasten-

ing the fall of the curtain?

Thus did he afflict himself, and his thoughts were tempered up to a painful expectancy, as the crowded carriages passed him one by one to a standstill. The serried faces at the windows seemed all to be gaping at him, and in view of his high-strung demeanour, they possibly were. But no one alighted. The engine snorted; the train was on the move—when Agnes stepped lightly out of a rear compartment. A few moments more and the crowd was gone. The lovers stood together on the quiet platform—Danbie in a flush of nervous gladness, Agnes with a pretty show of unconcern, though her face was suffused with a roseate glow.

They waived their usual greetings, peradventure they

forgot them.

'I was afraid you wouldn't meet me, Isabel,' he said.

'Almost I did not,' she replied. 'You'd have thought me very cruel, I daresay, but I should have felt—just the same as ever. There, sir! see how easily you would have misjudged me,' she airily added, a tender light beaming in her eyes.

'So much to learn, dear Isabel,' the lover replied-'so

much to learn of you.'

'And whither would you lead me, sir?' she asked him, indulgently independent.

'Let us go to the top of "Queen Elizabeth's Hill" yonder.

'Tis a charming place, and the view is magnificent.'

'I am marvelling at my own temerity,' said she, as passing soon afterwards through a little gateway, they began to ascend a narrow path into the almost impenetrable wood. 'It may be that I am not doing wisely,' and a shade crossed her radiant face as she steadfastly looked at him.

'Fear not, Miss Montith,' he gravely rejoined, laying open his soul to her in a counter gaze, though a blush tinged his cheeks at the suggestion of evil, 'you could not

be safer in the hands of God.'

'Lead the way, Mr Danbie,' she lightly said, with a pale smile, after a pause, 'I trust you,' and with few other words they strove their way up to the bright hill-top, and sat down on a bench, in the evening shadow of the old lighthouse.

It was a choice, secluded, lovely spot, open to the breath of heaven, and ranged a wide expanse on every side; sombre woodlands and pastures and green cornfields, drowsy homesteads and sunny glades beneath the hither trees, and distant ships a-toil on the broad river, with blue-grey coasts beyond, of leafy Kent; and they sat and looked upon it in silence.

'Is it not beautiful?' at length he asked her.

'Yes, indeed it is,' she softly replied.

He had culled a few primroses in the woods beneath, and he laid them in her ungloved hands.

'Are these my "harbingers of summer"?' she coyly questioned, as, looking down, she deftly posied them.

''Twas the playful fancy of my ardent hopes, dear Isabel,' was Danbie's low reply, responding to her thoughts rather than to her words. 'I had dreamt that haply I might win that summer for my loved one—that those pure and lowly flowers might symbolise my heart's devotion, moving her to accept me as she now accepts them—nothing doubting, nothing fearing; for even as I have brought you, fair one, to look down upon this varied landscape, so would I lead you through my own little country, showing you my hills and dales and mountain sides, that you might know me for what I am, and see your impress everywhere; in rightful sovereignty claim your own, and rule supreme in your principality of love. In my unmeasured fealty, I would live in consonance with your every part, regardfully

versatile for your dear sake, aiming always to be compeer with your blithe, elastic spirit, that each to the other might be all in all,—a dual life, blest into perfectness of living.

Agnes was fingering the flowers in her lap. He drew close to her, and gently took her unresisting hand ('twas a woman's hand, lithe and firm and beautiful, not a child's nor a grown-up baby's), and he manfully adventured his heart's appeal.

'Agnes Isabel, do you love me?'

Calmly the maiden lifted her face to his, meeting his impassioned gaze with speaking tenderness, as she firmly answered,—

'Yes.' Slowly she bent to him, as if by some compulsory force within. He caught her to his breast, and his lips sought hers in a long, love-laden kiss. 'Each to the other, all in all,' she whispered, as her head sank upon his shoulder.

'Ah! yes, yes, my beautiful, my own, my darling!' he cried, straining her passionately to his bosom in a lasting embrace; and their spirits flew together with murmured ecstasies,—too sacred to be told,—too deep to find expression. . . .

Lovingly they lingered, communing, hand in hand, upon that sunlit slope that faced the widespread, fleckered fields, with bright expanse beyond of Thames toward the sea; and wistfully they gazed upon Nature's nuances,—the pictured semblance of their blended lives, till the sun dipped his crimson into the dappled west, and all the bronzy glow around them paled down to ashy grey, and the sombre shadows of the hillside woods grew black beneath their feet.

'The day is done, my beloved,' he gravely said to her. 'See, the mists are creeping up from the river. Soon it will be night; all Nature sinks to rest. Oh! in that great day which never wanes, may you be ever mine. I ask of God—this blessing, none so dear.'

Looking pensively into the far-away, heedful of his allegory, intent upon his prayer, sate Agnes, but soon she turned to him in sweet simplicity, and laid her folded hands in his, breathing fond assurance.

'Dearest, we are children of the same Father; only He can give us happiness. Let us live in His light and confide in His love, "nothing doubting, nothing fearing," and

surely it will be granted us that I shall be yours and that you shall be mine, in all the sunshine of evermore.'

'My precious one, may Heaven bless you for your righteous counsel, may it be our law,' was the lover's devout reply, and folding her in a final embrace, and pressing a last, long kiss upon her dewy lips, he led her down the hill to their homeward journey. . . .

That evening, in the darkness, Danbie sat in his study, leaning upon his writing-table. His form was tense and his eyes were closed, his hands were knitted firmly in front of him. He was mastered by a tumult of emotions. The stillness was profound, and for a while he listened to the surging pulses that throbbed up from his glowing breast. As he grew quieter, in sympathy with the absolute silence, he was able to think and to feel, and to live over again that last dear hour with Isabel. A hallowed calm possessed his spirit, and tears of gratitude and joyous hope welled up from the depths of his being. Now would he become a new creature—the child of his true-love's heart, for she had endowed him, man though he was, with a fresh, glad birth into a radiant world—a world that should be all their own, ay, and theirs only; and as he dwelt upon the blessings this should mean, he bowed his head in reverent thankfulness to God. Motionless he sate there, far into the tranquil night, wrapped in his peace, taking repose in the hush of his soul, while the zephyrs toyed with the flowers at his porch, and the moon looked in at him through the open casement. . . .

Summer came, and a time of dear betrothal, while they attuned the cadences of their blissful hearts to the thousand puny things of circumstance. In their goings and comings in the busy world, their rambles at home at eventide,—in flowery dales and sheltered solitudes, out in the open, o'er breezy downs, or along the banks of babbling brooks, it little signified—everything was pertinent, all was kind. Their lips' fond harmonies, the unison of their eyes, the joined clasp of their hands, found welcome and accordance everywhere. Then, in the fading autumn, came frequent journeys to 'Sylvania Lodge,' with all the gladsome readymaking of house and home.

They were married at Yule Tide—that tenderest, holiest of all the year, and Kerfew Clitheroe gave away the bride. Their nuptials were of the very simplest in which befitting ceremony could have place, though joyously ornate at the altars of their hearts; and as the wedding party was setting out for church—a time-honoured song came 'over the lea,' of 'Christmas Day in the Morning.' . . .

It was years ago, but no darkling cloud since then hath veiled their fortunes. Heart in heart, as hand in hand, they have wrought out their true and tender paths together. Some troubles they have known, some cares and sorrows, some trivial grievances easily amended, and cursory disappointments—lovingly overborne. Children have come to them—a boy like him, a girl like unto her, so dearly loved for each other's sake, so fondly cherished for their own.

Now, in their mellow evening, his, the gloaming, they dwell upon the hill-top of their crowned lives, ofttimes recurring to their 'accomplished course,'—'to remind each other soulfully of their speedings by the way.' They have attained to the mysteries of each other's hearts, matured their fellowship and affixed their seals, jointly to confirm them for the great hereafter. In spirit-youthfulness,—ordinate and healthful, they still abide, calm in the ruling of their fixed fidelities, replete with the hope, the trust, the firm belief that though they lay them down in mortal darkness they shall arise to the 'sunshine of evermore'—'a dual life blest into perfectness of living,' in the felicity of receiving and the glory of giving.

CHAPTER XXIX

RUTHLESS TRIBULATIONS

'Pretty out here, child, very pretty,' remarked Mr Fledger, one Sunday afternoon, as he squatted down along with his 'little girl' amongst the ferns on the lower heath at Hampstead, and cast his eyes about him and over the breezy landscape towards Hendon and Harrow; and it

may be said in passing that a sense of the pretty should not be confounded with a perception of the beautiful, as the two are distinct, and we cannot credit our hero with the higher faculty.

The donkeys a-gallop on the 'Spaniards' Road' were kicking up clouds of dust, and a merry gabble and a tinkling of tea-cups could be traced to the 'Vale of

Health.'

'This is a funny sort of a place,' said Fledger. 'I can't remember anything like it in all my travels, and I've been about the country pretty much.'

'I think it's very nice, father, don't you? See how

happy the people look.'

'Oh! yes, I suppose so,' snapped the daddy; 'nice

enough for them that can enjoy it, but I can't.'

'Conny,' he broke out again, after a spell of the megrims, 'when I took that damned place at the "Forty Winks Club" I jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire.'

'I thought so, father; you have looked so miserable lately. Now hadn't you better have stayed at Kendon?'

'No, child, I couldn't stay at Kendon, and, for that matter, I can't stay here much longer. They treat me worse than a dog. I shall have to leave 'em, and what I'm going to do after that—God only knows.'

There was another melancholy silence, broken at length

by Conny.

'Mrs Buttox told me once, father, that she thought you'd make a very good beadle. Now, why don't you try for a

beadle's place? and—oh!—what is a beadle?'

'Nonsense, child! Why will you be so confoundedly ridiculous. A beadle's only a beggarly—well, never mind what he is; I sha'n't be one, that's certain. Let's get up and take a stroll; it's blowing chilly.'

So they took a roundabout stroll, and a very glum little stroll it was, neither junketers nor scenery possessing any further attractions for them; and when they found themselves back at the 'Flagstaff,' it was coming on to rain. They tried to get shelter in a photographer's caravan on the green, but the 'artist' told them to 'get along now'; so, as they were wretchedly clad and had no umbrella, they hurried home to their lodgings in Titmus Lane, going to bed early that the landlady might dry their things by the kitchen fire.

After that, poor, anxious Conny took to waiting for her father at the 'Wheatsheaf' of an evening; but the landlord 'couldn't a-bear to see her hanging about the bar; it was no proper place for a gal'; so, by that gentleman's sufferance, she would sit all by herself in the dim little ante-room adjoining the 'Winkers' parlour, pathetically patient, with her fingers screwed painfully into her lap, listening to the oratory going on within, and would often burst into tears or clench her futile little fists at the jests and jibes that were flung at her father. No one molested the plaintive creature, though Wightmight remarked to Huckaback, the first night he saw her there, that she was 'just the sort of abortion that a fellow like that Pilchard might have expected for a daughter.'

Occasionally, one of the company would give her some sweetmeats in passing; and Danbie, whose sympathies were easily aroused, used frequently to stop and chat with her. Once when he was leaving earlier than usual, he found her in tears at the treatment her father had just been subjected to; so he sat down and comforted her, asking her many questions about her kindred and her manner of living, and poor Conny replied to him in grateful simplicity. Danbie noticed that she always kept herself neat and clean, although so scantily clad; so after a while he gave her some gloves, then a nice pair of shoes, and, finally, a white straw hat with a black ostrich feather, which Conny accepted with delighted gratitude, and the little maiden's heart expanded to his kindness.

The waiting in the ante-room didn't seem so tedious now, for she could hear Mr Danbie making speeches in the parlour; and his voice was so earnest, and the things he said seemed so good and wise, that she was delighted to listen to him, and would often get up and peep between the curtains to look at him. When the meetings were over and he came out with the other gentlemen, a lump would rise in her throat and she would feel a strange tremor when he asked her how she did, and a thrill would go through her as he took her hand or patted her cheek, and told her, perhaps, what a patient little woman she was.

In brief, this poor child, who had famished for affection from her babyhood, was growing fond of him. She had reached an age when every girl who has the essential

feminine within her, is more or less disposed to easy fancies, and, absurd though it was, Miss Constance dreamt she was in love with Danbie, and felt quite romantic in consequence.

It was not love, nor was it so much as sexuality; only the pining expectancy of a fatuous little heart—at war with its isolation, and reaching out for a stalwart sympathy that should be all its own; and pining and yearning and seeking in vain—not conscious of the impossibility of her gaining the love of any man—not realising how unshapely and grotesque she was, nor that her misproportioned features did but travesty her gentlest emotions. Singularly devoted, warm and true, yet must this unfortunate relegate her inborn hopes to a Great Beyond, where, breaking the ban of ancestry by casting off the unseemly flesh, she might yet evolve a winsome beauty from the graces of her spirit, and gain a happy mating with companion virtue.

Weeks passed, and Conny was unfailing in her attendance at the club, fretting at the ill-treatment her father received, and nursing her infatuation for Danbie. Often he was not there, and then she would be downhearted and miserable—

a waiting-maid in fancy as well as in fact.

She had taken a bad cold one day through sitting about on Hampstead Heath, and had made it worse by going to the Wheatsheaf' in the evening. Next day she was very feverish, and she was obliged to keep her bed for a week afterwards, her recovery being in no degree promoted by her daddy's behaviour, nor by the vile concoctions of the 'landlady.'

Noticing her absence from the club, Danbie inquired of her father the cause of it, and Fledger telling him that his little girl had been laid up with a bad cold, and was still 'very peaky and queer,' he asked his Isabel to go and see her. He had often talked to Agnes about Conny, and she was pleased at the opportunity of doing her a kindness, and hastened over from Hornsey the next day.

The slatternly woman with the children opened the door in response to her soft, repeated tappings, and seemed annoyed and surprised at the advent of such 'company' for her lodgers; so, pointing up the rickety staircase when Agnes asked for Miss Filcher, she told her curtly that she'd 'find her up there somewheres,' went back to her kitchen and slammed herself in.

Conny was alone—her father had gone out 'to look for something'—and she was dumbfounded at the appearance of her visitor.

'I am Mrs Danbie, dear,' said Agnes, gently taking her hand; 'you mustn't mind me. You know my husband at the club. He has been telling me what a good and patient girl you are, and how ill you have been, and I have come to see if I can help you.'

Conny felt a great leap at her throat, and sat down on the

edge of her shabby little bed.

'You—you—are Mrs Danbie?' she faltered, pressing her clenched hands to her breast, and looking up into her visi-

tor's face in helpless dismay.

- 'Yes, my child; but how ill and nervous you seem! This is a miserable place, and unhealthy too, I'm sure.' (The children downstairs had been smacked, and were squalling, and a sickly odour from the stable-yard was coming in at the window.) 'Where is your father?'
- 'He's gone out, ma'am, to see if he can find anything better to do.'
 - 'And your mother, I understand, doesn't live with you?'
- 'No, Mrs Danbie; she ran away from father when his school broke up.'
 - 'And don't you ever hear from her?'
 - 'No.'

'My poor child,' said Agnes, 'how hard this must be for you!' and she sat down close to her and took her hand

again, sorrowfully and tenderly.

The two looked into each other's eyes. Constance perceived all the radiant beauty of her visitor—her happiness, her healthfulness, her prosperity of heart and life, and her sweetly-conscious title to another. With quick, inevitable revulsion, she gauged, once for all, her own disabilities—her poverty, her lonesomeness, and the hopeless reproach of her affection for Danbie. It was as if some giant-hand had struck her. Her eyes closed, her lips quivered, and, sinking upon the bed with a low moan, she buried her face in the bedclothes.

'Why, my poor, unfortunate girl, whatever is the matter with you? Tell me? What has upset you so dreadfully,

all at once?' cried Agnes, trying to lift her to her breast.

'Oh! don't touch me, please don't, Mrs Danbie,' she pleaded. 'Oh! why did he send you here? Mercy, mercy! I cannot bear it; 'tis too dreadful!' and the girl shook all over in her passionate agony. 'Why was I ever brought into this world to be—to be—what I am? Tell me, someone, for I cannot endure it. No, I cannot—no—oh, no—' and her utterances fell away to a plaintive weeping—pitiful to listen to.

Agnes was distressed beyond all expression, and was quite at a loss to comprehend the reason for this extreme despair. She flung herself on the unhappy girl and tried by every endearment to assuage her grief, but all in vain. Conny's shapeless form still shook with sobbing, and her face was rooted in the bedclothes.

At length her paroxysm wore away, and she became gradually quiet—so still, at last, that one might have taken her for dead. She gave no heed to the other's entreaties, and Agnes could only hold the one little hand that had writhed from under her, and wait for her to come to herself again.

There she lay motionless for quite a while; but she was gathering her forces, combating her anguish, stirring to a strength she had never known before, awakening the woman of her stern necessities. At last she sat up and turned her pale face full upon Agnes, looking at her solemnly for several minutes, heedful of nothing but her own emotions. Suddenly, she arose and grasped the gentle hands which were holding her.

. 'Come to the looking-glass—come!' she cried. 'You are so beautiful. Oh, how beautiful you are! I don't wonder that he loves you,' she groaned. 'But come, let me see the difference between us, so that I may know my own deformity, and remember as long as I live—how ugly, and stunted, and wretched I am,' and, before Agnes could make an effectual protest, she had dragged her to the squabby chimney-glass, there to be shocked by its double image.

A pigmy figure in slouching garments was planted there, shapeless and grotesque; the head buried between peaked-up shoulders; a monstrous Roman nose and giant mouth;

a mournful, tear-stained countenance, surmounted by a mass of black, dishevelled hair, and baby eyes, just underneath, that could not evidence the sorrow which was veiled behind them. Twas all a lying parody, poor Conny—a

hideous mockery of your sinister flesh.

Beside her stood a brilliant Hebe, whose radiance was discreetly heightened by 'the foreign aid of ornament,' perfect in grace and expressedly beautiful, rendering herself more lovely still by a palpable shame of her own beauty—upon beholding that dire comparison. There was no alloy of triumph in the fair woman's bosom, no self-adulation—there. Compelled though she was to be sensible of her contrasted pulchritude, her face only blushed the tenderest pity, linked with painful wonder that a mysterious God should frame two sister-beings so distinct, and hold them to such opposite fortunes.

'There, Mrs Danbie, just look what a frightful, miserable, ugly dwarf I am,' exclaimed poor Conny. 'I can't imagine how it is I've never seen myself properly before. Perhaps it was because I never had anybody beautiful to compare

myself with.'

Agnes drew her away to sit down on the bed again.

'Come, dear, I mustn't listen to this,' she replied 'Let us talk of something else,' and she opened her basket. 'See, here are some things that I thought you might relish. Have some of this jelly: you will please me so much if you will.

Where can I find a plate and spoon?'

'You are very kind, Mrs Danbie,' spoke the girl; 'but I can't eat anything just now—indeed, I can't. I am thinking, Mrs Danbie, how different we are. I was born for sorrow, and suffering, and people's ridicule, though sometimes they pity me, and one or two have been kind. But you were born to be happy, and to be loved and made much of by everybody, and I'm sure you deserve it.'

'Oh, pray do not talk like this,' protested Agnes. 'You must try and look at things on the bright side. Remember you are still very young, and I hope you will find many good

friends.'

'Well, Mrs Danbie, but I was going to say that I have a tender heart, like you. I can be kind and good, I think, like you, and I believe I could love anyone as well as you do . . . although I could hope for no return. No one

minds about my feelings. How could they when they once set eyes on me. Why, even my own father doesn't care much about me, I can see, although I try to please him all I can, and it's because I'm so hideous. must have somebody to love me. So, I've made up my mind to look for it amongst those who are ill and unhappy, and have no one to care for them, nor help them. Yes, then I shall feel that I, even poor I, am able to give something to other people, which they really want; then, perhaps, they will care for me, in spite of my ugliness. I will never leave father, though, as long as he lives. I will do all I can for him, no matter how long it may be, but, some day, if he dies, I'll be a nurse at a hospital, and help the poor creatures there, especially those, as I have been told, who have no friends to come and see them. So I shall always be amongst people who are more unfortunate than I. and shall not feel so discontented, besides doing some good in the world and earning somebody's love, and when the time comes, I ask God to show me the way, and I feel that He will. Yes, I know that He will, and she clasped her hands to her breast in silent supplication.

'May Heaven sustain you in your noble purpose, dear child,' replied Agnes, reverently . . . and they sat together,

hand in hand, for some time without speaking.

'You must come and see me at Hornsey,' said Agnes, breaking the silence. 'We have a pretty place, covered in with trees, and our garden goes down to the river. You must come and stay with us; you'll like it so much, and we'll do all we can to make you happy.'

'I must not come, Mrs Danbie,' replied the girl, with quiet resolution, 'for it would unsettle my mind. I have been craving for enjoyments all my life; now I will never so much as think of them again. My ugliness seems to be my curse, but I will make it my blessing, for I will stifle all pride in myself, and all hope of pleasure.

It was a final relinquishment of her girlhood, with its inherent desires and weaknesses, and ever after, she kept her

word.

Agnes looked at her in astonishment. She regarded this spirit, in so young a woman, as a special gift of the Divine, revealing gracious purpose, where, just before, seemed cruel mystery.

'I came to bestow,' she said, 'but I find it is my privilege to receive,—to learn from you, how much more praiseworthy it is to be good and kind and loving in adversity than it is in prosperity, and it seems to me now, that with people who are prosperous and happy, it has scarcely any merit at all. Yet, do not think, dear, that I take any pride in what I may do, or in what I may happen to be . . . for I feel I have little to withstand and no efforts to make; it is easy and natural, and seems unavoidable. I have had no opportunity of practising exalted virtue, and I am doubtful how I should acquit myself if I had.'

After this they sat and talked together confidingly. Agnes, for entertainment, reverted to her memories of India, and Conny, on her part, gave Agnes many particulars as to the house of Fledger, and was persuaded ultimately to eat some jelly and part of a sponge cake before 'putting by the rest of the things' for her father, who returned home soon afterwards in a querulous mood. So Agnes, after a few explanatory words with him, hastened to bid adieu, kissing Conny good-bye, and promising to come and see her again.

CHAPTER XXX

THE SHROUDS OF DARKNESS

THE Hampstead air, for all its healthfulness, did not seem to agree with Mr Fledger, or it may have been the moral atmosphere in which he was compelled to sustain himself, the nightly chills of which were undoubtedly prejudicial to his whole constitution. Be this as it may, our poor friend became so exceedingly unwell, or, according to his own expression, 'so cussedly out of sorts' that, what with a bad cold, an obstinate cough, and 'nasty pains in his chest,' he had to lay up for a while. His absence from the 'Forty Winks Club' played havoc with his interests there,—patience, forbearance and long-suffering not being factors of that sodality. It is true that Conny had run over to the 'Wheatsheaf' with an explanatory note from her father, and left it

in care of one of the potboys, asking him to give it to Mr Huckaback, but that young gentleman, promising that he would, had thrust it into his pocket and forgotten all about it.

So Enos Huckaback hunted up Mr Fledger one morn-

ing, without regard for ceremonies.

'Is that fellow Filcher at home?' he growled, at the brat-laden landlady who, obedient to his thundering summons, had hastened to the door.

'Yes, sir,' she replied, 'but he's ill or something; he hasn't been downstairs for a week. You'd better go up and

see him.'

'I will,' was the rejoinder. 'Where is he?'

'You go straight up them stairs, sir, and knock at the door on the right.'

So Huckaback hastened upstairs and knocked at the right-hand door with a right good will, turning the handle

and stepping into the room the next instant.

Poor Conny hadn't 'tidied up, nor put the bed straight, nor anything,' but had just given her father, who was sitting at the table, very much en déshabillé, a late and liquid breakfast. But none of this made any difference to the single-purposed Huckaback.

What's the matter here, heh?' he roughly demanded. 'Why the devil haven't you been to work all the week? Dam'd if we didn't think you'd gone and made a hole in the

water or cut your throat.

'I—I really haven't been able to come, Mr Huckaback,

I've felt so queer,' replied the wretched Fledger.

'Hoh! Got the mulligrubs, heh? Well, we can't put up with none o' that sort o' thing, yer know; that don't pay us. Here's your money for last week' (he tossed the pittance on to the table). 'We'll look out for another man . . . and don't you come hanging about the place after this, or I shall tell the chaps at the bar to kick you out. Good day to yer,' and he strutted off downstairs and out of the house without another word, leaving poor Fledger with his mouth full of broth and his throat choking with curses, and Conny sunk in a chair, with her face to the wall, to have a 'good cry' to her wretched little self.

Mr Fledger gave vent to his feelings in a torrent of frenzied profanation, in which he flayed and mangled the 'Winkers' to his heart's content, thumping the table, upsetting his broth and staggering about the room in foaming indignation. At length his fury exhausted itself, and he dropped into a chair, panting and pale, an unwilling listener to the moanings in the corner.

'Come, that'll do, Conny,' he broke out at length, 'leave off crying about it; it makes me feel all the worse, and there's no need for that, God knows! together a bit, child, so as I can lie down.' Put the bed

The poor girl arose at her father's bidding and made his bed, and when he had stretched himself upon it, she covered him over, and fetching her own hard little pillow, propped up his head with it. Then she sat down like a mute beside him, with her hands locked upon her knees, while the tears dropped heavily from her swollen eyes.

Fledger lay for some time tossing from side to side.

Suddenly he was seized with a choking cough.

'Bring me the basin,' he muttered. 'I feel sick, I think.'

Conny brought it to him, and in a few moments, to her consternation, he had vomited a mass of bloody mucus. 'Oh, father, father, whatever is the matter with you?' she 'I'll run and ask Mrs Jenkins to come up while cried. I go for the doctor, shall I?'

But he only mumbled, 'No, no,' and choked and coughed

again.

'You mustn't be frightened, child,' he gasped, when it was over; 'I remember having a spell like this when I was a boy, but I soon got the better of it, and so I shall now. Fact is, that rascal Huckaback has upset me more than I thought. Give me a towel,' and he wiped his mouth and laid down again. Conny threw herself upon the bed in a tremor of fear, stroked his face and chided him gently for putting himself 'in such a temper,' and after some more coughing he quieted down, turned on his side and fell into a heavy sleep, which lasted many hours.

Conny watched at his bedside all day, listened to his troubled breathing, murmured whimpering prayers in his behalf, and tried to have faith in what he had told her.

When he awoke in the evening, he declared that his 'nap' had done him 'the world of good,' and that he felt quite hungry. So Conny went downstairs and fried him

a chop, and when he had eaten it and drunk some tea, he felt so much better that he walked about the room until it was dark.

On the morrow Mr Fledger was so much improved that he was able, after a late breakfast, to go up on to the Heath with his 'little girl,' for some fresh air. It was a warm, sunny morning, and they sat down by 'Jack Straw's. Castle ' and gazed at the donkeys and the Cockneys and the Cockneys' children, and listened to a hurdy-gurdy man who, for the space of half an hour, squealed his discords to the merry crowd; but when they returned home there was a surprise for them.

Conny had a key to the street-door, so they let themselves in and went straight upstairs, and there sat Mrs Margaret Peables, in all the pride of country gingham, with a brand new bonnet, trimmed with brown ribbons, a well-cherished Paisley shawl, which Peables had given her twenty years before, lavender cotton gloves and a blue silk parasol. She had planted a high square basket on the table and held a reticule in her lap.

The good woman jumped up to meet them. 'So here you are, dearie. Mr Filcher, how do you do, sir? I promised to come and see you, and here I am at last. Mr Filcher, sir, you're looking rather sadly,' and she shook hands with him. Then she gathered Conny in her comprehensive embrace and bussed her face all over. 'Why, dearie,' she exclaimed, 'you look pale and ill too; I must cheer you both up. What a stifled little place this is,' and she fanned her moist face with her crumpled handkerchief.

Now Fledger, in spite of everything, had still some greatness left for humble people, so he was not disposed to do the honours to his rural visitor, and from being at first snappishly civil, he became curtly morose, and his manners did not improve when Mrs Peables unloaded her basket on to the table,—first a pink paper parcel of underwear for Conny, which she laid in her favourite's hands with much complacency, and afterwards, a variety of good cheer, a seed cake and a plum cake, both of 'cut-and-come-again' dimensions, some bottles of elderberry wine, some homemade sausages, and, shocking woman, a fine, fat hare which she had persuaded 'Sandy Jobson' to poach for her the night before.

'Upon my word, Mrs Peables,' said surly Fledger, 'you must be very charitable indeed, to cart all these things up here. Did you think you were coming to see a parcel of

paupers?'

'Paupers! bless my heart alive, no, Mr Filcher,' protested Margy, her rubicund face flushing to a deeper red. 'I didn't mean no offence, if you're goin' to take it that way. Times are hard, Mr Filcher, just now, and I thought the things, comin' from an old friend, would be acceptable.'

'Öh, so they will, Mrs Peables,' interjected Conny; 'it's very dear and good of you to bring them all this way. Did

you have any trouble to find out where we lived?'

'No, dearie, no. I'd got your letter in my pocket, and I just showed the direction to the cabman and he put me down here in no time, though he charged me eighteen

pence.'

Mr Fledger went and sat down by the window and studied the stable-yard below, and Conny, seeing that her father was in one of his impossible moods, took Mrs Peables into the other room, where they could have a long talk, in the course of which she gave her visitor a detailed account of their farings,—her father and herself, since they had come to London, including Mrs Danbie's recent visit, Huckaback's brutal incursion of the day before, and her

father's alarming sickness.

'Well, my dear child,' responded Mrs Peables, 'I'm not taken aback very easy, but I never saw anyone break up so bad in the short time your father has. I don't want to frighten you, but he looks to me like the picture of death. I s'pose it's his worriments, poor man, but it is such a pity he can't control his temper; other people have seen better days as well as him; I have myself. You remember how he becalled that gentleman that came to see him when he was at my place. Well, would you believe it, that gent has been again and put all manner of questions to me about him, and said he was very sorry he'd left, and what's more, dearie, and I know how pleased you'll be to hear it, he actually wrote out a cheque for me to give to your father when I came to town, and here it is,' and she drew from her reticule Dr Bolderlash's draft on Coutts's for £100, payable to Frederick Fledger, and handed it to Conny.

The girl was so dazed that she could hardly speak.

'Now, I've made it my business, dear,' pursued Mrs Peables, 'to see if I couldn't put that money into your hands, for I knew you'd turn it to better account than your father, but the people I have my things of told me that your father was the only one that could get it, and that he'd have trouble too, if he wasn't known at the bank. So, there you are, Conny; you must do as you please with it, though I wish it was yours, for if anything should happen to your father, it would be a God-send to a lone child like you.'

'This belongs to my father, Mrs Peables,' replied Conny, and I must give it to him, and oh! you can't think how glad I am, it'll help him so much. I only wish I could see that dear Dr Bolderlash and thank him for his kindness.'

Then they talked of 'old times,' as Margy chose to call them, and about the people and concerns of Kendon, until it was time they should have some dinner. So the good woman insisted upon going out for a steak and some new potatoes, and upon cooking them herself in Mrs Jenkins's kitchen, and upon serving them up, too, right under Mr Fledger's nose; and so intent was she upon pleasing both father and daughter that our great man was constrained to lay aside his austerities, and, drawing up to the table, he partook of the steaming meal with relish and satisfaction.

So in the afternoon they were all comfortable together and went and had tea in the 'Vale of Health,' and tarried there in the pleasant evening sunshine amongst the willow-trees and the benches, the clattering teacups and the chattering people until it was time for Mrs Peables to be starting for home. Conny went with her down to the station, and promised to write to her soon, letting her know how matters were going on; and they parted in much affection, the good woman impressing upon her, as the train was moving away, that if anything happened—she must come and live with her. . . .

When Conny gave her father Dr Bolderlash's cheque the next morning, there was another rumpus. Mr Fledger examined it with fine scorn, and turned it over in his hands as if it were tainted.

'I don't want the blackguard's charity!' he exclaimed.
'Many a bitter hour has that rascal been the cause of to me, besides being the ruin of me at last. No! damn it, I

wouldn't be beholden to him for so much as a paltry farthing. I shall tear it up.'

'No, don't, father; don't,' interposed Conny. 'How can you be so mad, with scarcely any money, nothing to do, and your health like it is. Let me keep it for you; you might

be glad of it some day.'

'Well, child,' he replied, 'I see I couldn't get it cashed without hunting up that infernal scoundrel, and I swear I won't do that,' and he tossed the paper on to the table and began pacing up and down the room. Conny quietly put it into her pocket, only too glad to have rescued it from destruction.

Mr Fledger had another attack of coughing and vomiting that afternoon, though not so serious a one as the former. He had the sense to go to bed early, and in the morning, after breakfast, went out with his daughter to look for a situation. They tramped about amongst the shops in the neighbourhood, making useless inquiries and sometimes getting ridicule for their pains.

Then they worked their way down the Hampstead Road, through Camden Town and along Tottenham Court Road, in a similar manner and with the same results, until utterly disheartened and too weary to go any further. So they turned into a little dark coffee-shop in Holborn, to rest and get something to eat. It was long after the dinner hour, so

they had the place all to themselves.

Poor Fledger sank down upon a high-backed bench, and though his 'little girl' tried to cheer him up, the tears stood in her eyes, and she was ready to faint from sheer disappointment. By-and-by, when they had drunk some very hot coffee and eaten some rather cool pork and potatoes, they both felt stronger, and Conny, the indomitable, took heart again.

'I wonder if there's anything in that newspaper, father,' said she, as she reached for a stained and crumpled Daily Telegraph on an adjoining table. Then she carefully read over the 'situation' ads. There were lots of nice situations, there always are—in the papers. 'Reliable persons wanted' with a little capital; clerkships, of course, in all their dismal uniformity; 'places' for 'single men' and 'married couples'; ready-handed agencies with golden perspectives, and 'advantageous openings' for 'pushing men' in town and

country; but somehow there was nothing that commended itself to her painfully discriminating old parent. At length Conny came upon this tempting opportunity.

'Wanted, a party to speak in public sometimes, for the Thumpwrangle Branch of the Royal United Total Abstainers, must make himself otherwise useful. N.B.—This is the right thing for the right man. Apply at the office downstairs, any time between 6 and 10 p.m. Thumpwrangle Hall, Cromer St., W.C.'

'I shall try for that,' ejaculated Fledger. 'Is it to-day's paper? just look.'

'Yes, father.'

'Very well, let's go back at once, so as I can lie down, and in the evening we'll go and see about it.'

So, to save time and rest their legs, they took a Hamp-stead 'bus which put them down at a stone's throw from Titmus Lane, and in the cool of the evening they sallied forth gain for 'Thumpwrangle Hall,' which they discovered after an hour's patient trudging and much inquiry. A raucous discussion was going on within.

A scruffy gentleman, with a terrier visage, was installed in the 'office downstairs,' and when our quaint couple presented themselves to him and stated their business, he grinned at the father and stared at the daughter,—telling Mr Fledger, after some interrogatories, that he could try the place and see how it suited him, and said he, 'If you don't suit us, why,—out you go. You'll be expected to take charge the hall, attend to the gas, clean the windows, sweep the floor and the passage, give out handbills, and do some talking now and then—according to orders. The pay is a pound a week, but you mustn't expect it regular, because we have to collect our money from the people at the meetings, and sometimes they don't give a sixpence. Well, that's about all; do you understand it?'

Our hero opined that they did and closed with the offer, but was told that he 'needn't show up before the beginning of next week, as they hadn't done with the other chap yet.' So father and daughter, dubiously content, took their way home again for rest and preparation.

The following morning they had an unexpected visit from

He had been much impressed by what his Mr Danbie. wife had told him about Conny, and had come to assure them both of his continued friendliness now that they were

no longer extant at the 'Forty Winks Club.'

Poor Conny was much abashed in Danbie's presence, and sought refuge from her painful self-consciousness in girlish reservation, while trying to disremember her latent fancies. Danbie noticed none of this, for his thoughts were intent upon doing them both some practical kindness. asked Conny how she was feeling, and trusted that she would soon be quite well again. The girl told him that she was much better, but that her father had been ill and was not strong yet. This Danbie was sorry to learn, and inquired of Mr Fledger whether he could do anything for him.

Our hero thanked him warmly, yet with some show of independence, and hastened to inform him that he had 'just secured another position,' which he hoped would prove more satisfactory than—er—the one he had left. 'It is an honourable engagement, sir,' said he, 'in which I shall have many opportunities of benefiting my fellow-creatures.'

'Ah! indeed,' quoth Danbie, 'what may it be?'

'Well, sir, I am about to take charge of a lecture-hall for the "Royal United Total Abstainers," and shall be expected to-er-promulgate their tenets and explain their beliefs, which I can very conscientiously do, seeing that all my life, I have been an enemy to strong drink. I must, of course, get away from this ramshackle place, though it has served me as a makeshift while looking for something better.'

Danbie's face relaxed into a half smile; he was too well acquainted with men and things to be deceived by the flourish of all this, although he affected not to notice it, told him he was glad to learn of the improvement in his prospects, and asked him again if he could be of any

service to him.

'No, Mr Danbie, thank you, there's nothing you can do. I've seen better days, as I've told you before, sir, and I hope to see them again.'

Oh, please, Mr Danbie,' ventured Constance, forgetting herself for the nonce in her care for her father, 'I think

there is something you could do.'

'Well, what is it, my little maid?'

'Why, sir, a gentleman has sent father a cheque for a

hundred pounds, and father can't get the money because he isn't known at the bank. Perhaps you might help him to get it?

'Very likely. Where is the cheque?'

Constance lost no time in handing it to him. Danbie examined it.

'Oh, yes,' said he, 'this is easy enough, I have had dealings with these people for a long time. Put on your hat, Mr Fledger, and we'll take a ride into town and settle the business at once. Conny, you must come too, it'll be a change for you.'

'Mr Danbie, I don't see how I can do it,' grandly objected Fledger; 'I really don't. That cheque, sir, was sent to me by a man who has always been my bitter enemy, the very man, in fact, who is at the bottom of all my—er difficulties. I won't be beholden to that man for a single farthing.'

'Nonsense, Filcher, come along. If this Bolderlash has been an enemy of yours in the past, it is at least apparent that he's a pretty good friend at the present; besides, man, you can't pick up a hundred pounds every day.'

Conny had already put on her 'things,' and Fledger, glad in his heart to be routed out of his obstinacy, protestingly followed suit, and they all went downstairs and crowded into the hansom which had brought Danbie to Titmus Lane.

They drove to the bank and secured the money; thence, in Conny's behalf, Danbie went with them to St Paul's Cathedral and the Tower of London, whereat the girl was greatly delighted. Returning, he took them to an eatinghouse in Fleet Street and treated them to a good dinner, and, enjoining Mr Fledger to put by that money of his against a rainy day, he sent them home to Hampstead in a 'four-wheeler,' going back himself, for the rest of the afternoon, to Paternoster Row. . . .

Fledger and his daughter found fresh lodgings in the top storey of a vast and gloomy edifice near to King's Cross; an 'industrial dwelling' it was, but not of the modern type. Gaunt as a hospital, dismal and grim, it enclosed three sides of a flag-stoned courtyard, where, in the mirk of the autumn evenings, a rout of shouting children scrambled and played. This attic of Fledger's, with a box-room adjoining, looked out across the road to an adjoining cemetery, crowded with gravestones and skirted by a muddy canal, and beyond to the garbaged slopes of Agar Town, where nestled the black knackeries of 'Belleisle,'—and their unsavoury steams, affoat in the heavy air, would often steal in at the window, faint and mephitic.

A winding stone staircase led up to these exalted chambers, and Mr Fledger had furnished them sparsely from a second-hand dealer's in that blank and squalid neighbourhood. Conny's bedroom was the box-room, about six feet by eight, and her father's was a sitting-room and bedroom combined. The outgoing tenant had left a couple of starveling geraniums on the dusty window-sill, and these the busy girl, with much liquid solicitude, was already wheedling back to a naked and bloomless vegetation.

From this uplifted nidus our hero sallied forth each morning to his 'honourable avocation' at 'Thumpwrangle Hall,' returning at mid-day for a scratch dinner, prepared for him by his daughter; and this, having hastily golloped, he betook himself again to the field of his labours, sometimes to spout, but mostly to drudge, until ten or eleven o'clock at night, with half an hour's intermission at six, for bread and butter and coffee; then he shambled home again, drymouthed and weary, to his sad and patient child, who would be sitting up to give him some tea before he went to bed, and to put a plaster upon his aching chest if his cough had been troublesome during the day. In feverish slumber he wore out the night, to arise in the early morning to a hurried breakfast, and repair to his stamping-ground. Seven days in the week did his duties claim him; so that his 'honourable engagement' was little better than the duress of a galley-slave, or a convict's grind at the treadmill.

One morning, after breakfast, while groping in his trunk for something, his silver ferule fell out of a loose bundle on to the floor. He had almost forgotten that sceptre of his bygone authority, and its sudden appearance fired him with savage disgust, knowing, as he now did, that he would never

wield it again.

With a passionate imprecation, he was about to fling it out of the window, when Conny caught hold of his arm. 'Oh, father, don't do that,' she cried; 'if it's no use to you, let me go and sell it somewhere.' Her father suffered her

to take it from him, for he was feeling ill, and weak, and low-spirited—his wrathful explosion nevertheless; and putting on his coat and hat, he dolefully went away to his droil amongst the 'Total Abstainers.'

After he was gone, Constance slipped out, too, taking the ruler with her, and finding, after some research, a 'nice, quiet pawnbroker's ' in the Gray's Inn Road, she went in and offered it for sale.

'Where did you get this?' inquired the man at the counter, staring at her at first and eyeing her sharply afterwards.

'It belongs to father, sir,' Conny replied; 'but he has no use for it any longer.' The pawnbroker looked it over and read the inscription, and offered her half-a-crown, saying he couldn't give her more, as her father might want it back. So Conny took the money and went home. But great was the fury of that crafty pawnbroker, and shameful were the expressions which danced off his tongue, upon discovering, later in the day, that the ruler he had bought was not of silver. . . .

'Gave you half-a-crown for it,' shouted Fledger, when his 'little girl' imparted to him the particulars of her recent transaction. 'What a damn'd rascal the fellow must be. Why, that ruler was solid silver. I know it for a fact, for I paid for it.'

'You paid for it, father?'

'Well, no—not exactly; but—er—I happened to know what a lot of money it cost; don't you be so confoundedly *literal*. I shall hunt the rascal up, and if he doesn't return me that ruler, I'll make it pretty warm for him'; but this was only an outburst of virtuous indignation, ending, there and then, in a bad fit of coughing, for he never did. Alas! poor broken humbug, he had himself been diddled in his finest fraud; and it chanced that he never knew it. . . .

One evening, four years after or thereabouts, our discredited ferule, approvedly tarnished, was reposing in a corner of the pawnbroker's window, where it had lain for many a long day before, in company with other trinkets, similarly unsaleable.

A painted and decorated damsel, loud with patchouly, came into the shop to dispose of a silk dress, wrapped in a newspaper; and while the pawnbroker went back to his

desk for some money, she snatched that ruler from its resting-place. The pawnbroker, looking over his 'things' after she had departed, found that it was gone.

'Ah!' he exclaimed, with a foul epithet; 'that blank, thieving wench thinks she's copped a bit of silver worth two or three pounds, but it won't fetch sixpence when she tries

to sell it. Ha! ha! serve her damned well right.'

But the 'thieving wench' had thought nothing of the kind. It was her father's ruler, and she had 'spotted' it in the window some time before. She was not vastly curious as to how it had come there, nor mindful of that parent whose remainder it was; yet she felt she had an honest right to it, and had 'copped' it accordingly. To her, it seemed a certificate of past respectability; to her, it spoke chiefly of the palmy days of her childhood's license, with a whisper, now and again, of her childish innocence; and she never parted with it to the moment of her death. . . .

It was the beginning of winter, and the mornings felt chill, and the nights damp and cold, to poor, enfeebled Fledger. The rain would come down in torrents, by the hour together, and sometimes he would be drenched to the skin when he reached home at night. Yet, with a strange persistency, he plodded on, blind to the menace of an utter collapse. His pains he pooh-poohed: he would not acknowledge his increasing weakness, nor suffer himself to look into his darksome future. Breaks of illness would keep him at home for a day or two; but as soon as he was at all recovered, he started afresh his abortive travail.

They had warned him not to expect his money 'regular,' nor did he; but his earnings were now in hopeless arrears, although he always received a sop on Saturdays. However, there came a day, after many weeks, when his patience was exhausted; toiling, as it seemed to him, for nothing at all. When about to go home that night, he made an effort to stand upon his dignity, and asked for a 'substantial embursement.' It was offensively refused him; whereupon he flew into a frenzy, much to the surprise of the 'gentleman in the office.'

'Keep your temper, you old blackguard; no swearing at me, if you please,' he retorted. 'You must have your money, must you? Well, then, take it,' and he roughly

counted him out a moiety of his wage. 'There; that's more than you've earned, and every farthing you'll get, you insolent old scoundrel. What do you think you're worth to us, eh? What have you been worth to us all this winter, I want to know? Why, we've been on the point of discharging you several times; so now, be off with you—quick! Here's your hat,' and he snatched it off its peg on the wall. Poor Fledger, the next instant, felt his old headpiece jammed down over his eyes; a shove from behind quickly followed, and a slam of the 'office' door upon his tardy heels,—when he found himself staggering in the sloppy gutter. He had gained his pittance, but lost his position; the precincts of 'Thumpwrangle' would know him no more.

Faint and bewildered, he turned to go home in the pelting rain. He opened his umbrella, but was compelled to shut it again, to support himself in walking, for a weight in his chest was dragging him down. He had almost reached the Euston Road, when his coughing and vomiting came on again. He clutched the street-railings and sank down upon a doorstep, bending feebly over for his imperative sickness.

A little knot of people gathered round him, and a policeman came across from the Euston Road. 'What's the matter 'ere?' he gruffly demanded, pushing his way between the bystanders. 'Drunk?'

'No, sir; he's ill,' ventured a shamble-shanked youth, with a residue of moist *Echoes* under his ragged elbow.

The policeman turned his lantern upon the quaking form, listened to the racking cough, and looked at the dark pool he was making on the pavement. 'H'm—lungs gone,' he said to himself. 'Come, my man, you can't lay there,' he remarked, with authority. 'Where do you live?' Poor Fledger distressfully told him. 'Well, that isn't so fur; d'yer think you can walk it?'

He thought that he could. So the policeman got him on to his feet, with the aid of the bystanders, and slowly led him away, bringing him at length up to his own door, but so utterly exhausted by climbing the winding stairs, that he had to half drag, half carry him across the room to his bed, where his wretched Conny fell upon him in an agony of grief. 'Oh, father! my poor father! speak to me,' she cried. 'Do speak to me. He's dying; oh, he's dying. Isn't he, sir?'

'No, miss; I hardly think so,' the policeman kindly replied; 'but I'll fetch a medical man,' which he quickly did; and then, inured to scenes like this, philosophically went his way.

The doctor found Mr Fledger's condition very serious. He went off hurriedly for some palliatives, and quickly returning, administered them to his patient; then he drew Conny into her little room and closed the door, to have a talk with her. This was their conversation:—

'Well, my little maid, are you this man's daughter?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Haven't you a mother, or any brothers or sisters or

friends, may I ask?'

- 'Mother's left us, sir; and she took my brothers and sisters with her; and we haven't any friends in London, at least—'
 - 'And very limited means, I presume?'

'Yes, indeed, sir.'

'What is your father's occupation?'

'He works for the Teetotallers.'

'So it appears you are the only one he has to take care of him?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, my poor child, I am sorry to tell you that your father is very ill—very ill, indeed.'

'Oh, yes, sir; I know he is,' and Conny rocked herself

in her chair.

'He is—well—er—his lungs are broken down; and should he have a hemorrhage after this, it might go very hard with him.' Conny moaned suppressedly, and clasped her hands together.

'Now, my poor little girl, if you have anyone you can send to, who you think might help you at a time like this, I advise you to do so without delay. I hope to bring your

father round again, but he is very weak. Do you know of

anyone?'

'There's Mrs Buttox, sir; she's a cook at St Bartholomew's Hospital. I know she'll come if she can, and I'll write to her at once. She used to be our cook at one time.'

'Indeed! Well, do so, by all means. You must see that your father has plenty of light, nourishing food as often as he can take it. Mutton-broth, with a little dry toast; sweetbreads, if you can get them; milk, but no tea or

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coffee; and a piece of tender broiled steak as soon as he can eat it. Now, can you prepare these things properly?'

'Pretty well, I think, sir; Mrs Peables, down in the country, used to teach me, and I've cooked for father ever since.'

'That's a clever little woman. Now, I must leave you. There's a bottle of port on the sideboard, give him a sip of that now and then; but I think he'il sleep through the night, so that you may get some rest, yourself; eat well and keep up your spirits. Good-bye; I'll look in again to-morrow morning,' and as the doctor's creaking footsteps went quickly down the stairway, Conny realised the full responsibility of her situation. Womanlike, she surrendered for a while to her weakness and her grief,—sobbing silently, with her face buried in her pillow; but at last, she put them away, with a murinured prayer, bending on her knees over her little bed, with fingers clasped tremulously upon it. It was a simple, humble appeal for Divine support and guidance, and a merciful outcome to her father's illness. Then she arose and set herself bravely to her task, and faced her stern affliction.

Mr Fledger slept easily through the night, thanks to the doctor's medicines; and hour after hour, until the early dawn, Conny sat watchful at his bedside, when she sank sideways upon her father's bed, and dropped into an uneasy slumber.

Mr Fledger rallied considerably as the day progressed. He took plenty of nourishment, and in the afternoon wanted to get up, which was not permitted by the doctor. His faithful girl was kept very busy with his various necessities, but she had found time, the very first thing, to write to Mrs Buttox, and the boy who brought the medicines posted the letter for her.

CHAPTER XXXI

KISMET

'LAWKS, missy, what a place you've come to,' exclaimed Mrs Buttox to Conny, as, almost out of breath, she over-

took her going slowly up the stairway with some provisions. 'I seem only to have come out of one hospital to go into another. How are you; and how's your poor father?'

'Oh, Mrs Buttox, how glad I am to see you. I didn't expect you so soon. Father's a little better, I think.'

'Well, missy, your letter came yesterday afternoon, so I begged off the first thing this morning.' Then she kissed Conny on the landing, and declared she should hardly have known her, she'd got so thin and pale. They had reached the top of the stairs.

'Father was asleep when I went out,' whispered Conny; 'and I shouldn't like to disturb him. I'll go in first, shall I? and if he's still asleep, we'll slip through into my room,

and when he wakes up, you can go in and see him.'

'Yes, missy; I wouldn't disturb the poor man for the world.' So they went quietly in, one behind the other, upon finding Mr Fledger in a doze, and tiptoed into the box-room, and shutting themselves in, had a long and anxious conversation. Conny gave Mrs Buttox all the particulars of her father's illness, and told her exactly how they were 'situated.' Mrs Buttox was full of condolences and practical suggestions.

'I'm only sorry,' said she, 'that I can't stay with you all the time, for you both need me bad enough, poor things. But I'll try and come once a week; so you must

cheer up, ducksy, all you can.'

But Conny could now hear that her father was awake, so she took Mollie in to see him.

'Good morning, Mr Fledger. I was so sorry to hear you were ill, and I do hope you'll pull round again soon.'

'Oh, it's you, is it, Mrs Buttox?' feebly shaking hands with her. 'Well, you've caught me in a pretty plight,' was the weak reply; 'but I shall be better after a bit. I had this sort of thing once before—and I never noticed the going of it—and—I don't believe I shall this time.'

'Very likely not, sir. But you must keep yourself quiet, and take plenty o' nourishin' food, so as to get well as soon as you can—both for your own sake and your daughter's. Ah! sir, what would you have done without this faithful

girl?'

'That's true, Mrs Buttox. She takes after my poor mother; the only one of my lot that ever did.'

They talked a while longer, and then Mrs Buttox found an opportunity to be of service, and for the remainder of her stay was all activity and helpful kindness. She made up the fire, cooked Mr Fledger his dinner, and served it on the little table at his bedside. The broiled steak was done to a turn, and the custard she made him and the jelly she had brought with her—were of the nicest and best. The invalid partook of them all with a quite satisfactory relish, and when, late in the afternoon, the good woman left, a gloze of cheerfulness had overspread the little party.

For several weeks after this, Mr Fledger apparently improved, owing, perhaps, to his unusual rest and to an interval of mild and sunny weather. But as the winter advanced, with its frosts and fogs, his strength rapidly declined, and though he made a point of getting up every day, the pains in his chest grew continual and his cough at times was incessant and harassing. His daughter nursed him with constant care, attentive to his every whim, and

timorously observant of the doctor's behests.

Mr and Mrs Danbie frequently visited them, and were very kind in various ways, and so were some people Conny had become acquainted with, downstairs; while Mrs Buttox, true to her promise, came every week, staying the whole day; and these helpful sympathisers sustained the girl considerably, although she had little hope now of her father's recovery. A month wore away, without much change, but Mollie, upon her arrival one morning, perceived that Mr Fledger was worse, and, indeed, he had passed a very bad week; so she asked the doctor privately, about the patient's condition, and was informed that 'Mr Fledger's life was hanging by a thread,' and that 'he couldn't last the winter through.' In the afternoon she broke this news to Conny as gently as possible, but the poor girl had been expecting it, and, so far as she could be, was prepared for the worst, although her trembling lips and starting tears gave evidence of her distress. Mrs Buttox took her to her arms and soothed her like a mother, and, when she was somewhat composed, asked her what she thought of doing if her father died.

'I've made up my mind to be a nurse at a hospital, Mrs Buttox. I should like to come to St Bartholomew's so as to be near you. I should do so much for the poor, sick

people that they wouldn't mind my looks and would be grateful to me—very likely; and, come to that, it's all I'm fit for. I'm too ugly and deformed to be loved by anybody.'

'My gracious! child, and don't I love you? And, besides,' deprecated Mollie, 'don't you never think of doin' that for a livin'. Why, you've no idea, the dreadful sights and scenes you'd be witness to. You couldn't stand it for a week; and, if you did, it 'ud soon make an old woman of you. Why not go for a nursemaid in a gentleman's family?'

'No, Mrs Buttox, they wouldn't be kind to me; I'm too vile-looking. The master and mistress would both be ashamed of me, and the children would laugh at me and make fun of me, just as they did at home. Besides, other things have happened since that I don't forget. No, my mind's made up; I shall be a nurse.'

'Well, dearie, if I was a young woman, it 'ud be the last

thing I should think of,' protested Mollie.

'Yes, you'd be thinking of someone falling in love with you and marrying you, but they never will me,' retorted the girl.

'Nonsense, dearie, you're not so bad looking, I'm sure; you've got pretty eyes and a nice complexion, and remember—the best kind of man don't marry a woman for her looks.'

'Well, don't let us talk about it any more, Mrs Buttox,' interrupted Constance; 'I know what I am, and all the talking in the world wouldn't alter me; but if you'd speak for me at the hospital, I should be so much obliged.'

'Well, dearie, we'll see, since you're so set upon it; but I hope to do better for you. Perhaps that gentleman what comes here—Mr Danbie, isn't it?—could get you a nice situation. I'll talk to him about it the very next time I see him.'

When Mrs Buttox came again, Mr Fledger was no better, and she asked him, after some hesitation, if he wouldn't like to see a clergyman.

'That's as good as to tell me I'm going to die,' said the sick man as a sudden pallor overspread his haggard face—and his eyes seemed to burn in their sockets as he looked at her. 'No, Mr Fledger, it isn't. I hope you'll get well and live for many a long day yet; only, when a body's as low as you are, sir, it's nice to have a good Christian man come and talk with you—leastwise, that's how I felt when I was down with the fever, twenty and more years agone.'

'Ah! don't try to deceive me,' responded poor Fledger.
'I know'; and he turned heavily over to the wall, and pulled the counterpane over his face. The woman sat and watched him silently, and Conny knelt at his bedside,

drooping and tearful.

All at once in the stillness, the sick man turned upon them, a sudden glare of madness in his eyes, raised himself in his bed and stretched out his arm. 'Don't tell me, either of you, I'm going to die. I'm not an old man yet, and I don't feel ill. I'm getting stronger every day. Look here!' and he struck a blow at the bedpost with his clenched knuckles, which, besides shaking him from head to foot, brought the dull, watery blood creeping out over the broken skin.

Conny sprang to her feet. 'Why father, you've made yourself bleed,' she screamed. 'Poor father,' she piteously added, gently taking his hand, and dabbing the wounded place with her handkerchief. But he drew it away from her, under the bedclothes.

That's nothing. I tell you 'Barked myself, have I? once more, I'm going to get well. I'm going back to the days of my boyhood, and they're plainer to me now than you are. I can see the meadows where mother took me, and the cows standing in the water. I can smell the fresh air, too, and the wood fires they're lighting in the cottages. The sun's rising behind the hills. The mist is hanging over the river. There's a plough-boy coming along with his dinner tied up in a handkerchief. The plough's sticking in the ground, and the horses stand and roll their eyes, and jingle their harness, for it's time for 'em to begin work. I want to go back, too. I will go back! Mother! mother!' but the strain was too great, and he sank exhausted upon his pillow. The fever faded out of his face, and in a little while, the delirium had left him. Afterwards there was a spell of coughing, an hour of restless tossing, and a final dropping off into troubled slumber.

The woman and the girl, dolefully communing, sat down, hand in hand, and watched him. . . .

It wanted but a week to Christmas. With ingenerate pertinacity, Mr Fledger had rallied once more, and was 'puding round nicely,' as he was pleased to term it. His cough had abated and his appetite was keen, although he had not as yet been out of his room, for he was 'plagued with a fever,' as he expressed it. Besides, he was frequently delirious and gave occasional signs of approaching dementia.

It had been snowing all day, but the afternoon was closing in clear and cold, with a pale moon in the slaty sky. The weather had been muggy for several weeks past, and this sudden change to a sharp frost seemed to start the flickering fires of his life afresh, and bestir him to fitful enterprise. He had been sitting bolt upright at the table for an hour or two, tapping his fingers upon it, starting and fidgeting, and staring out of the window. Conny was finishing some mending by the firelight, and her father was watching her, stealthily and strangely.

'Little girl,' he suddenly burst out, 'I feel much worse; you must go for the doctor.' His daughter looked up in alarm, and encountered such a glare in his eyes that she could have screamed with terror. 'Much worse, Conny, don't you hear?' he harshly cried. 'Go for that doctor,'

and he began pacing about the room.

'Yes, father,' the girl tremulously replied, and nervously putting on her cloak and hat, and lighting the lamp, she hurried to the door. Turning to look at him, as she hastened away, she saw that he was actually grinning at her! No sooner had she disappeared than he fetched his hat and overcoat, and put them on. Pulling a bag out of his pocket, he emptied it upon the table, gold and silver; there might have been forty pounds. A part of this he pocketed again.

On the sideboard was a fresh bottle of wine, which the doctor's boy had brought him that afternoon. He opened it, gulped down half its contents, corked the bottle again, and plunged it into his pocket. 'There,' he exclaimed, snapping his jaws, 'that'll keep me a-going.' Then he buttoned up his coat, and was making for the door, when

the coin on the table caught his eye. 'Ha! that won't do—leaving it there. Let's see.' So he cast a searching glance round the room, snatched up the coal-scuttle, swept the money into it, and shoved the scuttle under the bed, then with a dry little chuckle, he made his escape, staggering downstairs into the street.

At first, he was bewildered by getting out of doors, after being confined so long to his room; but he soon collected himself, and hurrying to the corner, hailed a passing omnibus. 'Drive on,' he cried, in a lofty key, to the surprised and amused conductor, as he stumbled into a seat by the door.

'That we will, sir, all in good time,' the fellow replied; 'but don't you upset yourself, becoz by the looks of yer, you mightn't be able to stand it,' then thwacking the 'bus with his hand-strap, they joggled away to King's Cross.

The cold air and the bustle of people had a stimulating effect upon Fledger, as he alighted and hastened into the station. He took a first-class ticket for Estingham, and anxiously asked the clerk when the next train started.

'Five-twenty, sir,' was the reply, 'look sharp, and you'll just catch it'; so poor Fledger scurried off down the platform. They were slamming the carriage doors.

'Going on, sir,' shouted the guard, throwing up a hand

of inquiry.

'Yes, yes,' cried Fledger.

'Come along, then. *Come* along,' sung out the guard, catching him by the arm; 'which class?'

'First.'

'Here you are, look!' and the next instant he was bundled into a compartment all to himself.

'Oh!—er—put me—put me off at Estingham,' was his breathless enjoinder, while his ticket was being clipped; 'here's half-a-crown for you, and I want to be alone.'

'Very good, sir,' replied the palm-tickled functionary as he slammed him in and locked the door. 'A queer old chap, that,' he remarked to a porter standing by, as he swung into his passing break-van.

'Yes,' was the response. 'Where's he off to? Colney Hatch?' but the train had swept away with an echoing shriek; poor Fledger was speeding upon his last journey.

Left to himself in the dark rush through the tunnels, his wild mania gained force and circumstance. 'I shall soon be there, mother!' he cried; 'don't call me any more. I shall soon be there, mother, soon be there,' he pitifully groaned, as he swayed backwards and forwards and from side to side in his cushioned and quaking seat. His excitement increased with the rush of the train. 'On! on!' he vociferated whenever it pulled up at a station; 'what are you stopping for?'

At Estingham he was 'put off' by the guard, with an indulgent 'good-night, sir,' and a glance of hurried curiosity, and, as the train disappeared in the darkness, he threw his ticket to the man at the gate and bolted out along the high-

road, leaving the town behind him.

The night was clear. A biting wind was blowing from the north. The moon, fast dipping to the horizon, cast great, black shadows from the leafless trees—across the whitened road. At first he went at a canter, until his breath was exhausted; then he stumbled along, panting and moaning, until somewhat recovered, breaking again into a dog-trot, that was loud with stertorous labour. The cruel wind drove the fever into the marrow of his bones, his mouth was parched, his tongue swollen, and his burning and aching chest felt as hollow as a cavern.

At length he reached a solitary inn, where he had often rested and refreshed himself on coming back from Estingham to Kendon—those times he was looking for a situation. It stood high upon the left, at the entrance to a dense wood, and the road went past it down the hill to the village, where the lights were faintly shimmering, a mile away. There opened on his right a narrow, winding lane, overgrown with hedges and tall trees; it was the way to the old church-

yard.

'I remember this place,' he muttered, as, tottering up to the horse-trough that stretched along in front, he tried to steady himself thereon. The doors of the inn were shut and the blinds drawn close, but the windows glowed with a ruddy light; a drowsy revelry came from within, laughter and joking and the scrape of a fiddle. Some farm-hands with their doxies had come up from Kendon to make merry upon bread and cheese and ale, round the roaring wood-fire in the tap-room, and their simple cheer reminded the hapless man of the bottle in his pocket; so he drew it forth and emptied it down his throat. But the folks had started an old-time song, and its unromantic measures floated out about his ears,—

> 'I wish, I wish, but it's all in vain, I wish, I wish I were a maid again; A maid again I ne'er shall be, Till apples grow on an orange tree.'

'Devils! you are mocking me,' howled the poor maniac, as, jumping up from the trough, he hurled his empty bottle through the bar-room window; then, with a loud, wild cry, he turned and dashed across the road into the dark labyrinth that seemed to be yawning for him.

The wind caught his hat and blew it away, but he never knew it; his one purpose was to reach his goal, his only sense—that he was nearing it; his frenzy sustaining him in his final outburst.

'I'll soon be there, mother,' he groaned, as he urged himself along, 'I'll soon be there'; and when he stumbled or slipped or ran butt against the hedges, in the darkness, he would fall to his knees, quivering from head to foot, but

struggling to his feet again, would stagger onward still. At last he emerged upon that solemn glade which fronted

the ancient cemetery. 'Twas a ghostly snow-patch now, The crumbling cemetery shut in with forest blackness. wall, from side to side stretched vaguely visible. Out of the gloom beyond—the pale, old church tower rose gaunt and stark amid the tree-tops, and the gnomon upon its hoary face, catching a pencil of the parting moon that was glinting the boles of the spectral firs, pointed down solemnly to the shades beneath—to the tumbled grave-stones there, so cold and grey; to the mouldering sepulchres and snow-flecked hummocks of the long-forgotten dead. The winds moaned and whistled in the woods all round, and swept, howling down the long stretches of the lifeless avenue, while from their alien heights the stars looked forth in passive innocence. Poor Fledger paused for a moment, pierced to the soul by the solemn scene. 'God!—how awful!' he muttered. dreamt it not-like this.' With frenzied fatuation now-he scrambled over the low wall, and panting and stumbling at every step, groped his way between the monuments and over the mounds, towards his mother's grave, shaking in his terror from head to foot; for, to his fever-stricken brain, goblins were waiting for him in the hollows of the tombs, and the very air seemed trooped with sudden spectres, who were chasing him behind.

A timeful instinct guided him to the grave he sought, and there he halted, straining erect, great beads of agony

dropping from his brow.

The moon had vanished; save for the wan shroud of snow at his feet and the unheeded, twinkling stars in the

strip of sky above him, all was utter darkness.

For a short interval he supported himself in breathless agony; then his delirium lifted and passed away, leaving him confronted with his dire extremity,—knowing that he stood in the midst of the dead, far from all succour and from humankind, and that death itself was fast approaching. A long, wild, piercing shriek went up from his harrowed spirit, and a startled night bird, swooping from the trees, gave him mocking rejoinder, though it sounded to him like the cry of a woman.

'Mother, save me! Oh, save me!' he wailed in piteous anguish, lifting his arms feebly to that inscrutable Heaven, where awakened reason told him that alone she was. But tortured nature could endure no more; his knees gave under him, a choking spasm fastened upon his throat, there was a pang within, and a gurgling groan—as the blood gushed forth from its broken tenement. He sank upon the flattened sod a lifeless heap. . . .

On the following morning, some children, searching for mistletoe in the woods near-by, caught a glimpse of poor Fledger's body over the churchyard wall, and fled agape to the village with a dreadful tale. Soon, the countryside was in commotion. Mrs Peables, with an eager bevy of neighbours, went out to the old cemetery 'to see who the poor man was,' and having satisfied her curiosity, and somewhat recovered from the shock and surprise, ran off to London in quest of Conny, whom she found at the lodging-house in a pitiable condition. A policeman was ensconced in the dismal room, and Conny was in care of 'the people downstairs.'

While not withholding from the hapless girl the death of her father, Margy softened the news as well as she could, by concealing the manner of it, devoting herself, besides, to a timely alleviation of her miseries; but it was a day of bewildering grief to the lonely orphan, who could do little

else than sit and rock herself and weep.

Mrs Peables, however, was practical in her sympathies; she discovered the coal-scuttle and the money it contained—right under the policeman's nose, a good deal to that worthy's professional chagrin. She wrote to Mr Danbie and Mrs Buttox too, crudely explaining the situation in Conny's behalf, arranged in the afternoon for the sale of the furniture, settled with the 'agent' about the rent and going home late in the evening—took her protegée with her.

The inquest was a terrible business for Conny; yet, when she had prayerfully passed through that ordeal, she found herself fortified in a remarkable degree, and went to the funeral with a calm, sad courage that was the wonderment and admiration of the numerous country-folk who witnessed

it. . .

They buried poor Fledger on Christmas morning, in his mother's grave—those who had known him down at Kendon; and before the dawning of New Year's Day, his ungarnished name had been cut upon her stone.

Thus, simply and sadly they laid him away, his writhings finished and his shifts ruled out. Discomfited in life, he had failed not in death, for he had attained to the plausible

Nirvana of the great majority.

By honest effort or earnest work—this man had accomplished nothing. His career had been a multiplex experiment with the logic of facts—a shallow ecstasy, a sounding exclamation, and of all his Latin axioms, if possibly he included it, this one he should have taken perseveringly to his breast—Ne sutor ultra crepidam—let not the cobbler go beyond his last—for though in his earlier scrambles over the great rocks of knowledge he had picked up divers odds and ends, they had made him a pack—that he never could balance—of shifting detritus which refused to cohere.

After all, there have been worse men than Frederick Filcher, pretender though he was—of a rare pertinacity, so let us graciously murmur—God rest his bones, or phrasing

it in the diction he had loved so well:-

Requiescat in pace! nil nisi mortuum bonum.

LAST WORDS

THERE are certain salient figures of this history, who, having dropped out of it inadvisedly at various times, seem now to be pleading for a few parting words. Let us indulge their appeal in bidding them adieu.

Our respected friend, Bolderdash, long continued to be a reputable authority at Burton's College. He devoted himself with particular zest to the scholastic and social training of his nephew, Aldermaston, and gained him a

lucrative position in the Colonial Service.

The doctor, be it said, was one of those prevalent people who, throughout the course of their sunny lives, devote their best attention to the predominant forces, whether in politics, business or philosophy, who worship success and perceive no virtue in minorities. This admirable bias, amongst other things, he imparted to his Leonard—and with such happy effect that, when it came to that young gentleman's turn to manipulate the smooth surfaces of society, he did ample credit to himself and his uncle, and achieved a marked But age has dimmed the doctor's eye, furrowed his handsome face and bowed his portly figure, and although, in backward thought he is Bolderlash still, he has deceded from the proud activities of his college days and is smouldering comfortably away in the household of a mated though motherless niece who receives a liberal solatium for her services, with the assurance of a favourable clause in her uncle's will. . . .

Now for a legend that shall touch your heart. Sly-boots Toby, like his remarkable brother, came to his end in a

singular way. Just listen.

That careful soul, yielding overmuch to his furtive instincts, had for many previous years, unbeknown to Mrs Toby and the 'fam'ly,' reposited an ever-growing increment of secret pelfs, in a canvas bag beneath a flagstone in his darksome cellar—and a movable ladder which led down from the kitchen was footed firmly in the centre of that stone. Toby had reasoned with himself in this wise—long before.

'That Belinda o' mine seems all right, and she's been all right—for more than twenty years, and I 'ope she'll stay all

right up to the last, but you never can tell. Supposin' she was to turn agenst me like that beauty of Fred's did—and take herself off one fine day with every scurrick of mine she could lay her hands on, where should I be then? Poor father used to say, "Treat every man like a rogue till he proves himself to be honest, and never trust him then, my son, further than you can see him." Now, I think father was right, and, of course, the same thing applies to a woman, just as much; in fact, rather more. Wherefore, Toby must have something solid to fall back upon, he must, in case matters should turn out different to what he expects.'

Precautious, prudent, provident Toby; so he hid away his savings in that darksome cellar for ten plodding and

tardy years.

But an end has to come to all things in this world, and one memorable midnight, as he lay alongside his slumbering spouse, wakefully ruminating over matters of business, he thought he heard someone groping about down in the cellar. 'Ho! ho! some scoundrel's trying to rob the till,' he remarked to himself with a delicate irony. 'I'm not as lissome as I used to be, but I'll stop that little game if I have to die for it. Now don't you wake, Belinda dear, don't you,' he fervently prayed, as he wormed himself stealthily out of bed. Then he slipped on his stockings and a long, ragged dressing-gown which had served him nocturnally for a quarter of a century, and coaxing the door open, felt his way downstairs to the kitchen fireplace and grabbed the poker.

'Not such a fool as to light a candle,' he whispered to himself, 'for a job like this,' and he softly opened the cellar door inch by inch, and poked his long wary nose into the pitchy darkness. There was nothing to be seen, nothing to be heard. He listened in a moist shiver for several seconds, but still there was nothing. 'H'm—curious,'

he muttered, 'couldn't ha' been my fancy surely.'

He waited again, but there was still no sound. 'Well, it was a mistake o' mine, I s'pose, but I must know for certain about that money, or I sha'n't get a wink o' sleep all night,' so he stepped off the door-sill. By a fatal mischance the ladder was minus. The 'servant gal' had been using it that evening to put up a clothes-line out in the yard, and had shoved it half-way in at the basement

window—and as it was getting too dark to see in the cellar, had gone away and left it there over-night. Toby fell head first—ten 'scoundrel' feet on to that broad, hard flagstone which concealed his savings, smashing the top of his skull and breaking his neck.

His Belinda snoozed the peaceful hours away till morning, and was indeed only awakened by the shrieking servant

when she discovered her master's body.

They found the ladder bumping about in the breeze, at the open cellar window. They found a poker and a pool of blood, and they also found afterwards—a verdict of 'accidental death,' but none of the 'fam'ly' ever found the old man's money, although, the apprentice-boy having bolted off to America, the day after the funeral they did find a 'canvas bag' behind some 'things' in his bedroom. Now here endeth the prudences of Toby Filcher. . . .

Bobby 'the buttons' got back eventually to Waltonbury House. The property had been disposed of several years previously, to a city stockbroker who had bought it 'cheap,' and whose 'ladylike' wife and 'cultured' daughters were anxious to achieve distinction as country gentlefolks. They restored the mansion and all belonging to it, in a quaint, ostentatiously old-fashioned style. Its poor whitened crest was supplanted by a lofty new roof which was ultra picturesque and conspicuously antique. Mrs Fledger's attic staircase was vehemently swept away. The garden was rearranged and fastidiously planted, and those Tudor gates were rehabilitated in all their original glory, but more specifical still—that 'absurd, old, outré' carving of Phœbus over the hay window, was replaced by a deep-cut hatchment of the fresh 'family arms.'

Bobby in his walks abroad had noted these changes with attentive eye. A cat-like fidelity to the old demesne might always have been justly attributed to him, but now, in view of these marked improvements and the flush resources of the people within, which he shrewdly held them to indicate, an unconquerable yearning possessed his soul—to nestle again at the old chimney-side, and he felt more than ever, as he peeped in at the gates, that Waltonbury House was the place for him.

By dint of much painful experiment down at the station,

he had made good progress in the arts of the sycophant, awkwardly preluded though they had sometimes been, and one fine morning he adventured a call upon the ladies at 'The Knolls,' as Waltonbury House was now yclept, and humbly set forth to them his varied qualifications and eager There was almost nothing that he could not do, and nothing at all that he could not learn, and he assured them besides that he had been a confidential servant of the former master, and so adroitly did he shape himself to the spirit of their interrogations, that he persuaded those ladies he was a most intelligent and indispensable fellow to have in the place—able to inform them who was who, and well advised as to the comparative status of all the best people in the neighbourhood. So, albeit they were provided with a complement of London servants, they took him on as a supernumerary, soon to blossom as a flunky in reserve, footman, coachman, and butler by turns, and with a brand new livery, redundant of buttons, and a fine strain of impudence, gotten up to match, with no hot-headed Mollie to take him to task, nor Fledgeress virago to cudgel him, with a key to the pantry in his long waistcoat pocket, the parlourmaid for a sweetheart, and the mistress to lend ear to his cunning surmises, he naturally felt that he rollicked in clover, his genius had triumphed and his soul was at peace....

Margaret Peables long kept shop at Kendon, though latterly her nimble fingers had failed her at the plaiting, while her 'business' was dwindling insensibly away.

To make matters worse she was taken down with rheumatism and a low fever, from which she did not properly recover. The neighbours helped her as well as they could through her long illness, and their children took turns in minding the shop, but in the end—poor Margy was constrained to give up, part with her things for the little they would fetch, and go into the alm's-house down by the Toll-gate, where they nursed her infirmities and prolonged her miseries for several hapless years.

Conny from afar, used frequently to visit her, and the two would sit and talk together, hand in hand, on the porch that looked out over the shrubbery, to the pleasant village gardens. Here it was, one golden evening, that Margy breathed her last, holding, as it happened, her favourite's hands in both of hers, as though in tender premonition.

'My life has been so lonesome, dear, these many years,' she plaintively whispered; 'often and often, I've pined and worried dreadfully for my poor James—a-thinking of his precious love for me in the days that are gone for ever. Many and many's the time I've felt so desolate and heartbroken that I've prayed God to take me out of a world where I seemed to have no portion, and to bring me to my husband who, I am certain, is waiting to receive me in a better land, and to my darling boy that I do so hope to see again.

'Yet, the Lord be thanked, through all these years of heartache, since my dear ones were snatched away from me, I have been supported in every duty, and whatever my hand has found to do, I have been able to do it with all my might. And you've been such a comfort to me, dearie, over and over again you have, and I've grown to love you like my own child. But I'm broken with pain and weakness now, and I don't seem able to bear up any longer. I'm so weary of it, dear. Oh, so weary. If the Lord in His mercy should see fit to take me this very night, I would be deeply thankful to Him.'

She lapsed into silence, propped in her wicker arm-chair, and as Conny kissed her, her eyes closed and her head sank slowly upon her breast. She was thinking, thinking, back to that bright glad time when she was young and blithe and fair to look upon, and proudly happy, too, in the man she loved. Dormant fancies stirred within her, as she dwelt upon her happiness—overpast. A sudden rapture fastened upon her senses; he seemed to be taking her in his warm embrace, she knew his strength once more, and felt his fondness, and all her life went out to him in sweet accord.

Joyous memories, sacred moments. Heaven had honoured her soul's desire, was heeding her prayer and calling her home—an angel of sympathy leading the way.

Constance, bending in the twilight over her drooping form, as yet perceived no change, nor till the crippled fingers relaxed their hold, did she know she was looking in the face of the dead. . . .

Last words to our heroine; how fared it with her? Our artless, hapless, homeless Conny.

True to her vow and fixed resolve, she withdrew, anon, from every beguilement, whether of proffered suasion or her own predilections, and obedient to the promptings of her sterling nature, assumed the industries of a ministering life, wherein the years have borne witness to her tireless devotion.

If virtue is its own reward, how rich a guerdon doth she render to her patient spirit—for all its provings in the paths of grace. Hers is emphatically a life of love,—pure and steadfast, warm and tender,—meekly prone, withal, to self-denials.

Though ever dumbly yearning for a like mutuality, haply to fill her soul's ideal, she only seeketh to the bosoms of children, for she hath no trysting in the heart of man.

By the endeavours of Mrs Buttox and Mr Danbie, following the death of her father, Constance was taken upon trial as a nurse at an orphanage near Epping, where she evinced betimes an excellent aptitude for her new avocation; docile, sweet tempered, winsome and affectionate, mindful always of the well-being of her charges, and studious of their varied requirements, she soon gained the favours of those who employed her, and was promoted step by step to a confidential position, and accorded liberties and exemptions which she has never abused.

See her in after time, in spruce attire,—a motherly maid, becapped and aproned in spotless white, a plaintive beauty speaking in her homely face. She is sweet and winsome still, and breathes a broadcast tenderness,—sympathy with the good, the brave, the true,—compassion for the helpless, weak and broken-hearted. A liberal reader and an earnest thinker is Constance, and she attunes herself to a world of realities by working and loving and learning therein. She has few acquaintances now, beyond the bounds of the orphanage, although the management place every confidence in her, and the children dote upon her very name, Mrs Buttox, whom she often used to see, died years ago at the hospital, and poor Margy, as we know, is also passed away, but Constance visits, not seldom, at Sylvania Lodge, and she counts all the Danbies as her dearest friends.

Frequently of summer evenings, she goes with her orphan children into the forest, sitting in the shade at first to watch them at play. Then she calls them around her 'under the greenwood tree' to tell them fairy tales, or wondrous legends of the past; thereafter to join them in their gambols through the sunny glades, or, as they all go 'hide and seek' about the boles of spreading oaks, dive merrily into leafy dells, or nestle beneath the cosy fronds of the bracken, she gently foreprizes them of little dangers, or runs to find them deeper nooks—where they may hide themselves away.

Afterwards, as the sun is setting and the time draws nigh for going home, she leads their clarion voices in a well-learned strain, a simple song of praise to the Almighty. It figureth the dawn of those children's lives,—so sweet it is, so fresh and jubilant,—albeit the dusk is hastening down, ay and falling possibly, into your heart, dear Constance,—your heart, so patient, pure and brave; yet, I bethink me, a day-spring cometh in the glad by-and-by, when your beauteous angel,—new joined with a radiant galaxy of ministering spirits, shall echo loud hosannas in the Gates of Heaven.

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